

The Art of Sleep Relaxation

The ideal is to develop a routine, a time to bring the relaxation response that becomes as much a part of the day as brushing your teeth.

One technique taught at the Benson-Henry Institute For Mind/Body Medicine*:

1. Pick a focus word, sit quietly and close your eyes.
2. Relax muscles, breathe slowly and concentrate on your focus word as you exhale.
3. Continue for 10-20 minutes twice daily.

To the extent that any disease is caused and made worse by stress, this relaxation response can help.

Other Techniques

Imagery
Progressive muscle relaxation
Repetitive prayer
Mindfulness meditation
Repetitive physical exercises
Breath focus

Sleep, like living well, is an art. Many people take sleep for granted, but being well-rested is one of the surest keys to good health and happiness. There are a whole host of holistic treatments to help you sleep well. Acupuncture, yoga, feng shui, and aromatherapy are just a few of the best-known ways to get those eight straight hours of deep, regenerative sleep that everyone needs to function properly during the day. To start of, take a look at some proven relaxation techniques to get you sleepy.

The Art of Sleep: Relax!

Many of us grew up taking sleep for granted: take a bed, lie down, close your eyes, and wake up the next morning. Today, modern medicine and science have taught us that there is much more to sleep than meets the eye. Like many other aspects of life, sleep is an art form. There are many elements to getting a good night's rest, including the quality of your mattress, your bed's location in your room, your diet and exercise habits, and your mental attitudes toward sleep itself. In this article we look at a whole host of holistic and relaxation techniques that can help you to achieve a comfortable, regenerative night's sleep.

"Holistic health" refers to a philosophy of medical care that considers the physical and mental aspects of life as closely interconnected and as equally important in treating ailments. Holistic health and medicine are increasingly used in mainstream medical practice as part of a broad view of patient care and are now being taught in leading medical schools.

One holistic technique to help you sleep is known as "progressive relaxation." In progressive relaxation, you lie on your back and close your eyes. You then feel each part of your body relax, one-by-one. You sense and become conscious of each body part's weight and you then breathe deeply until you feel that part of you sink into the bed. You start with your feet: feel their weight. Then breathe in until your feet sink into the bed. Then work your way up to knees and upper legs and then your abdomen, buttocks, hands, arms shoulders, up through your shoulders, neck, mouth, cheeks and eyes, until your entire body is relaxed. If done properly, you should feel yourself drifting off into sleep.

Another relaxation technique, "toe tensing," also involves lying on your back and closing your eyes. You then sense your toes and pull all ten toes toward your face. The count from one to ten, slowly, repeating this cycle ten times. Again, you should feel relaxed and about to fall asleep.

Many of you have already done some version of deep breathing, either in yoga class or in a sports practice warm-down. Lie on your back and inhale slowly through your nose, progressively filling your chest from the lower part upwards. You then hold your breath for one or two seconds and slowly release. It's as simple as that. Just repeat this exercise this until you feel like you are about to fall asleep.

A fourth relaxation technique, known as guided imagery involves visualizing yourself in a peaceful setting. Here, you lie on your back with your eyes closed again and imagine yourself in a peaceful setting of your choosing. You then imagine everything about this idyllic surrounding: what it looks like, smells like and sounds like. If you're imagining a beach, for example, try to imagine the sun's rays hitting your skin, the smell of the sea salt and the sound of the waves hitting the shore, over and over again, peacefully, until you become drowsy and fall asleep.

A fifth technique, known as quiet ears involves you laying on your back with your hands behind your head. You then place your thumbs in your ears in order to close off your ear canals. You should hear a high-pitched, rushing sound: listen to it for ten or fifteen minutes, then remove your hands, put your arms at your side, and go to sleep.

One last note on relaxation techniques. Your homework begins long before bedtime. For the techniques discussed above to work, it's best to avoid certain activities during the day which can contribute to your feeling tense or excited at night:

- Do not take a nap during the day. Contrary to popular belief, and much to the dismay of our Spanish compatriots who cherish their siesta, naps can actually throw off your body clock and make you feel more sluggish and tired. If you must take a nap, limit it to less than thirty minutes.
- Limit your caffeine, alcohol and sugar intake. Caffeine and nicotine are both stimulants and alcohol is high in sugar, so excessive quantities of either will contribute to restlessness and give you an artificial high. If you have to drink caffeine, limit your intake to two cups a day, preferably before noon. The same goes for smoking. If you must smoke, try to limit the number of cigarettes and smoke them early in the day rather than later.
- Finally, eat a healthy and balanced diet. Try to eat a few hours before going to bed: this will give you a chance to digest your food properly. Your body will then be able to concentrate on your relaxation exercises and on sleep. It may also help to drink some warm milk before bed-an old trick: like turkey, milk contains tryptophan, which induces sleep. Warm the milk to release the tryptophan, and add a bit of honey.
- Keep a sleep diary. In your diary, be sure to include the time you went to bed and woke up, total sleep hours and the quality of your sleep. You also should keep track of how many times you woke up during the night and what you did : i.e. "I went to the bathroom" or "I got up and watched TV for a bit," or "I just lay awake in the dark." Finally, keep track of your diet (what you ate and when), as well as the amount and times of caffeine or alcohol consumption and any drugs or medication that you took. You're your moods, paying special attention to particularly stressful or anxious times as well as happy and relaxed periods. Also, if you write down some of your worries and concerns in another part of the diary, this may help to relieve yourself of them for the night and relax.

If you follow these steps and try a few of these relaxation techniques, you should be on your way to eight straight hours of deep, peaceful sleep.