

Joel R. Hitt, M.Div., L.C.S.W.

Affiliates in Counseling and Psychology

175 Langley Drive, Suite C-1

Lawrenceville GA 30045

770.995.7789 | Fax:770.995.0171

www.hitt.com | joel@hitt.com

Brief Relaxation Techniques

I have found the following 3 exercises to be very helpful for many of my clients. In fact, I use the Quieting Response and Body Scan almost daily in my personal stress management program. These 3 exercises are useful during high stress situations, but are also good to use *preventively*, before your stress has a cumulative buildup with full-blown symptoms. Used regularly, they can help alleviate muscular and skeletal tightness, limit tension headaches, and induce relaxation and a sense of calm.

When we become anxious, many physiological events occur in the body. These include the release of adrenaline, sympathetic nervous system outflow, peripheral vasoconstriction (e.g. cold hands, feet), shallow or restricted breathing, and tense skeletal muscles (especially facial, as in a clenched jaw). Left unaddressed, these symptoms can become habituated and lead to other more serious damage to our bodies, mind, and emotions over time.

The body's response to perceived stressors is inherent, and genetically programmed. How severe the response is, however, and how long we remain in a stress state, and even what we identify as stressful--these are all items ***under our own control***. This is true even if your genetic loading is toward a higher stress response than, say, your partner's is. You may have to work harder at it, and you may even need medication to assist you with it, but ***you can gain control over your response to stressful stimuli***. Stress management is simply the development of means to exercise optimal control over stress. The following are 3 ways to get jump-started on this venture.

A. The Quieting Response. This brief technique is designed to last 6-10 seconds only, but may be extended if you choose to do so. This is a good exercise to use in the midst of chaos, panic, hectic circumstances, or when you can only spare a moment.

1. Identify the annoying stimulant. Quickly determine what it is about this situation, here and now, that is annoying. (For examples, the phone might be ringing frequently, someone might be sitting behind you kicking your chair, there may be excessive noise, or you may feel pressured to perform well or think quickly.)
2. Smile, outwardly or inwardly, and say to yourself, "Leave my body out of this." (You can either say this outloud, or say it to yourself silently.)
3. Take 2 easy, deep breaths. As you inhale count from 1 to 4, and as you exhale count from 1 to 4.
4. As you exhale the second breath, let your jaw go limp, and quickly spread some of this relaxed loose feeling to other tense muscle groups.
5. Resume your activities.

B. The Two-minute Body Stress Scan. Again, this exercise is designed to take about 2 minutes, but may be extended when you have time to do so. People often perform this body scan when they are waiting for an appointment, while watching TV, during breaks, etc.

1. Interrupt your thoughts. Stop thinking about your surroundings and switch your thoughts to your breathing. Take two deep breaths from your abdomen and exhale slowly. To breathe from your abdomen, imagine a balloon inside your belly that is blowing up, and pushing your diaphragm upward.
2. Scan yourself for tense or uncomfortable spots around your body. As you locate a tense spot, attempt to loosen this area up a little. Allow your muscles to feel as heavy and warm as they can in this short amount of time.
3. Warm your hands momentarily.
4. Do two quick yoga exercises:
 “Head rotation” - rotate your head around in a circular motion once or twice.
 “Shoulder roll” - roll your shoulders forward and backward a couple of times.
5. Recall a pleasant thought, image, memory, or feeling--just for a few seconds.
6. Take another deep breath and return to your activities.

C. A Short Meditation (6-10 minutes).

1. First scan your body to see what your muscles feel like. Attempt to relax and loosen up, and allow yourself to feel body sensations. Stay with this body scanning for a couple of minutes. Allow the muscles to feel as heavy and warm as possible. Focus on warmth in your arms and hands.
2. Focus now on your thoughts. What are you thinking of? What kinds of thoughts have you had today? Which ones come to mind now? Are these upsetting thoughts or comforting ones? Dwell on the comforting or pleasant thoughts--place a greater emphasis on these thoughts.
2. Focus now on your emotions or feelings. What do you feel? Content? Angry? Annoyed? Sad? Excited? Peaceful? Allow yourself to feel whatever is there.
3. Take 3 deep breaths (easy and slow) and return to your activities.