



Teens + Relaxation

PATIENT EDUCATION

A photograph of two teenagers, a boy and a girl, sitting on a ledge. The boy on the left is smiling and looking towards the camera. The girl on the right is looking upwards with her eyes closed. They are in a school setting, with backpacks and books visible in the foreground.

Feel better

Have balance

Calm

Breathe

BARBARA WOODWARD LIPS
PATIENT EDUCATION CENTER

Do you know how to relax?

of course you know how to relax. Right?

Well, actually...

Watching TV, texting your friends and surfing the Web are fun activities that can **HELP** you relax. But to become **REALLY** relaxed, you need to try something different.

The kinds of relaxation described here are ways to calm your body even when there's a lot going on. It takes some training to do this, and it's worth it!

Read this booklet to find out:

- What happens inside your body when your body is "stressed."
- How to train your body to calm itself.

If you practice relaxation skills every day, it can make you feel better. Life may be a bit easier and maybe more fun when you are trained to relax "on command."

Calm

What's going on inside

● The brain and spinal cord.

Together, the brain and spinal cord are called the central nervous system (CNS). This is the boss of the body. Using the nerves like streets, the CNS sends messages to the body to tell it what to do.

● The nerves.

You have thousands of nerves from head to toe.

Your brain uses the nerves to send messages to and from the body. Usually, the brain gets its messages FAST, like “Turn the doorknob NOW or you’ll have to yell ‘OW!’ next!”

● The autonomic nervous system (ANS).

Under the direction of the brain, this system manages all the things that happen automatically in your body.

Like breathing, heart beating, blood pressure, etc.

The ANS has 2 parts:

- ◆ **The parasympathetic system:** This system helps keep the body working when you’re at rest and sleeping. It handles things like digesting food and circulating your blood.
- ◆ **The sympathetic system:** This system is in charge of your automatic “flight or fight” activity. (More on that later.) When you’re stressed, or having physical symptoms like pain, nausea or spells, your body can go into fight-or-flight mode.

● There are other systems hard at work in your body too. ² But this isn't an anatomy book, so we'll skip those.

Ever heard of endorphins?

They're chemicals released by your body *when you are relaxed*.

Endorphins help create the sense of calm and peacefulness that everyone thinks of when they want to be relaxed. **They also help reduce the sensation of pain.**

If pain is one of your symptoms, this is one more good reason to use relaxation as soon as you start to feel poorly.

What happens when your body works "too hard"?

Do you have tense muscles? A fast heartbeat? Pain? Stress?

If you're having a lot of symptoms or your body is stressed a lot, the sympathetic system can be worked **too hard**.

- You're more likely to react too strongly to things.
- You could have a hard time calming down after being stressed.
- You might get sick more often.
- You might have more pain, more fatigue, etc.

This is why doctors ask about your stress level when you get sick. To have good health, ideally, you want a balance between the work of the parasympathetic and sympathetic nervous systems.

The Autonomic Nervous System

The ANS has 2 parts:

1

The parasympathetic system

This system keeps your body going when you're at rest. It makes sure that your food is digested, your blood keeps moving and you keep breathing — all good stuff to do.

Under the direction of the brain, this is the body's manager for all the things that happen automatically, when you're asleep and when you're awake.

2

The sympathetic system

This system is in charge of your automatic "fight or flight" activity. Basically, when you're stressed or having physical symptoms like pain, nausea or spells, this system helps your body figure out how you're going to react.

Maybe you've heard of “fight or flight”

If your sympathetic nervous system is in-gear a lot, your body is going to feel like it's often in some kind of a struggle. It's gearing up to either fight the “stress” or run away from it somehow.

- ▶ **Fighting symptoms or stress** can look just like fighting — screaming at someone or having a physical fight. It can also be less obvious, like being rude or sarcastic to family and friends or picking a fight for no good reason.
- ▶ **Taking flight (or running away)** can be just that — walking out on a fight or getting so frustrated that you drop an activity. It can also be doing something reckless, like driving too fast and other stuff we don't even want to put on paper. In a non-scary way, running away could be spending too much time on distractions. Like sleeping a lot, working extra hours or spending hours in front of the computer or TV.

You've got power!

It may seem like you don't have a lot of control over your body's systems. But you do.

You have some control over many activities in your body, like your:

- Heart rate.
- Breathing.
- Muscle tightness, called muscle tension.
- Skin temperature.
- Brain waves.
- Behaviors.

Relaxing is one way to get control so your body can work better for you.

Tips for training

Relaxing is NOT a passive thing to do, like watching TV. You have to work your brain + your muscles to do this kind of relaxation.

Practice relaxation:

- When you're calm. If the brain is already stressed, it won't learn new things as well.
- Often. Practice until it starts to feel easy and automatic to do!

The more you practice, the better you'll get at it. When you're good at it, you should be able to do it almost automatically, when you need it most.

The more you relax, the better you'll probably feel all day long. You'll be bringing your parasympathetic and sympathetic systems into balance. *Balance is a good thing.*

So many ways to relax...

The following pages describe three of the easiest ways to relax — ways that you can learn to do and use anywhere. You may decide that you like one way more than another. Or you may decide to use one kind of relaxation for certain situations and another relaxation in different situations.

- Relaxed breathing
- Guided imagery
- Progressive muscle relaxation

Relaxed breathing

- Find a quiet place where you can sit or lie comfortably.
- Let your shoulders relax and drop.
- Breathe in slowly through your nose until you feel comfortably “full.” This could be to a count of 4, for example. Slow, smooth and even breathing is best.
- Think about “breathing low” so that your stomach pushes out as you breathe in.
- Breathe out slowly and smoothly to another count of 4. Let your stomach relax.
- If you “breathe low,” you’ll be able to keep your chest still and your shoulders down.

To practice, put your hand lightly against your stomach. Try to push against it by breathing low and “filling up” your stomach. Think of your stomach as a balloon that gets bigger as you inhale and smaller as you exhale.

Repeat this exercise as often as needed. At first it may feel awkward. But keep practicing until it feels natural and relaxing! You can use this tool alone or with other tools.

Other tips for relaxed breathing

- If you first tried this exercise sitting down, also try it while you’re lying down. Put a piece of paper on your stomach area so you can see it move.
- Pretend that you’re blowing bubbles as you breathe out through your mouth.
- Pretend you’re holding a candle as you blow out. Imagine yourself blowing just hard enough to make the flame flicker, but don’t blow the flame out.
- Breathe into a whistle or on a feather so you can “hear” or “see” your breath.

Relaxed breathing

Find a quiet place where you can be comfortable.

Keep your chest still and your shoulders down

1

Inhale

Breathe in slowly through your nose until you feel full

Feel your stomach push **OUT** as you breathe in

2

Exhale

Breathe out slowly through your mouth

Feel your stomach pull **IN** as you breathe out



Guided imagery

Imagine a relaxing place — somewhere you feel safe, happy and comfortable, somewhere you'd like to be.

Use all of your senses to picture every detail about this great place. What do you see? What do you hear? What do you smell in the air? If you'd eat something here, what would you taste? What do you feel under your feet and in your hands? Finally, think about what you do when you are here.

You can use this tool any time, alone or with other tools.



Guided imagery

Your relaxing place — somewhere safe, happy and comfortable — may not be a beach, we know. We added this page so you could jog your memory when you want to relax quickly.

I Feel:

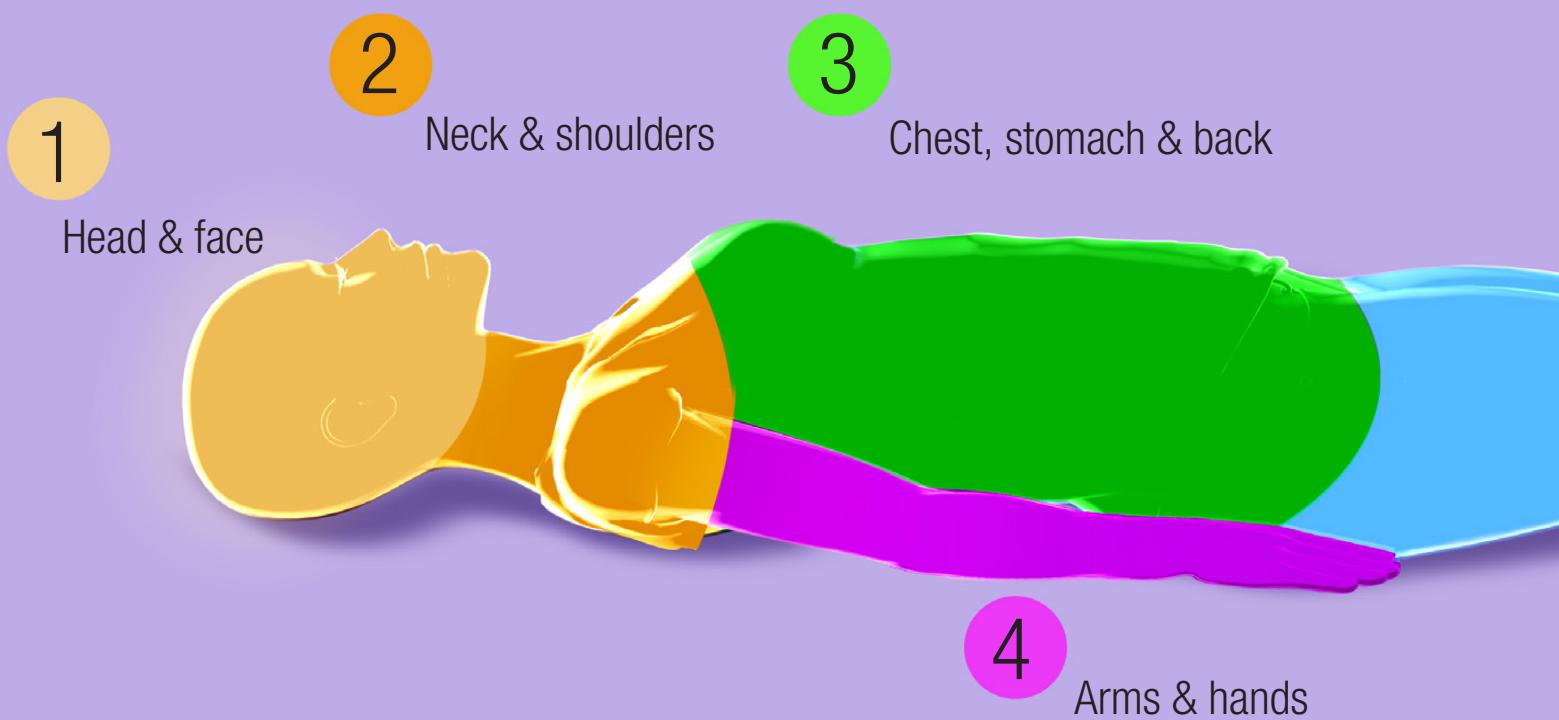
Who is with me?

I See:

I Smell:

I Hear:

Muscle relaxation



Progressive muscle relaxation teaches you what muscle tightness feels like — and what it feels like when you are totally relaxed. When you know those feelings, you should be able to find stress spots in your body and help yourself relax quickly.

In time, you may be able to avoid getting stress-related tight muscles by doing muscle relaxation once in awhile.

How this works

Lie flat and start at your toes or your head, whichever you prefer. Move (progress) up or down your body "in order." (See below.)



- ▶ Work on only one set of muscles at a time. Keep the rest of your body relaxed.
- ▶ Tighten all of the muscles in that group, or "zone."
- ▶ Hold the muscles tight for several seconds. How does that feel — good or bad?
- ▶ Release the tightness in those muscles. Does it feel better now? Does it feel warm or relaxed? Note the difference between the tight state and the relaxed state.
- ▶ Move on to the next muscle group.

Do each of these parts of your body:

- Head & face:** Clench your jaw. Scrunch your eyes and your forehead.
- Neck & shoulders:** Lift your shoulders toward your ears and tighten your neck as you do it.
- Chest, stomach & back:** Do all of these areas together. Hold your breath and try to pull your belly button down to your spine.
- Arms & hands:** Make fists and tighten every muscle in your arms.
- Thighs & calves:** Tighten the muscles behind your lower legs (the calves) and your upper legs (the thighs).
- Feet:** Curl the toes downward, as though you're trying to tightly grip something with your toes.

What's next?

Practice these strategies when you are feeling calm and at your best. Be sure to practice at least once or twice daily. When you are really good at using these tools, you should be able to slip into "relaxation mode" automatically. And that can be especially helpful when you feel symptoms like pain, nausea or stress beginning.

Over time, you may be able to reduce your symptoms or even prevent them.

Continue practicing daily to help you avoid your symptoms as much as possible.

Get a coach!

If you really want to relax well and get good at it, you might need to work with a coach. After all, **the best athlete or musician at your school didn't get that good without a professional teaching him or her how to do it.**

If you want to reduce the amount of stress your body holds each day — sort of like tapping a stress-reset button — you may need help. Not only do you need to relax, you need to train your body to react WELL to symptoms instead of revving up. A coach can teach you how to quickly relax your body *when you need it most.*

When the day gets tough, wouldn't it be nice to get through it a bit easier?

Contact a psychologist, therapist, social worker, nurse, or someone similar. You won't have to work with this person forever, just until you can easily learn to relax your body.

BARBARA WOODWARD LIPS PATIENT EDUCATION CENTER

Mrs. Lips, a resident of San Antonio, Texas, was a loyal patient of Mayo Clinic for more than 40 years. She was a self-made business leader who significantly expanded her family's activities in oil, gas and ranching, even as she assembled a museum-quality collection of antiques and fine art. She was best known by Mayo staff for her patient advocacy and support.

Upon her death in 1995, Mrs. Lips paid the ultimate compliment by leaving her entire estate to Mayo Clinic. Mrs. Lips had a profound appreciation for the care she received at Mayo Clinic. By naming the Barbara Woodward Lips Patient Education Center, Mayo honors her generosity, her love of learning, her belief in patient empowerment and her dedication to high-quality care.