



# MIND BODY CONNECTION: STRATEGIES TO REDUCE PHYSICAL AND MENTAL TENSION

A RESOURCE FOR VETERANS, SERVICE MEMBERS, AND THEIR FAMILIES

## UNDERSTANDING EMOTIONAL HEALTH

Good emotional health is important for everyone. When we have good emotional health, we are aware of our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. People with good emotional health have learned healthy ways to cope with the stress and problems that are a normal part of life. They feel good about themselves and have healthy relationships. Many things that happen in your life can disrupt your emotional health and lead to strong feelings of sadness, stress, or anxiety. These things might include being laid off from your job, having a child leave or return home, or dealing with the death of a loved one. For service members, there are additional burdens related to the military experience such as a health concern or problem related to deployment, loss of comrades in combat, or the possibility of being re-deployed. For some people, "good" changes can be just as stressful as "bad" changes. So, getting a promotion at work or having a new baby might also negatively impact your emotional health. For service members, readjustment to civilian life can be a "good" change that also presents many difficulties and stresses such as the challenge of finding work as a civilian and reuniting with family members, children, and friends after being away for awhile.

## HOW CAN MY EMOTIONS AFFECT MY HEALTH?

Your body responds to the way you think, feel, and act. This is often called the "mind/body connection." When you are stressed, anxious, or upset, your body tries to tell you that something isn't right. For example, high blood pressure or a stomach ulcer might develop after a particularly stressful event, such as the death of a loved one or friend. Physical signs that your emotional health is out of balance include: change in appetite, headaches, high blood pressure, upset stomach, and many others.

Poor emotional health can weaken your body's immune system, making you more likely to get colds and other

infections during emotionally difficult times. Also, when you are feeling stressed, anxious, or upset, you may not take care of your health as well as you should. You may not feel like exercising, eating nutritious foods, or taking medicine that your doctor prescribes. Abuse of alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs may also be a sign of poor emotional health.

## HOW CAN I IMPROVE MY EMOTIONAL HEALTH?

There are several ways to improve emotional health. The following section goes into detail about three strategies you can try on your own at home to calm your mind and your body: diaphragmatic breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and guided imagery.

### Diaphragmatic breathing technique\*

1. Sit comfortably, with your knees bent and your shoulders, head, and neck relaxed.



2. OR Lie on your back on a flat surface or in bed, with your knees bent and your head supported. You can use a pillow under your knees to support your legs.



3. Place one hand on your upper chest and the other just below your rib cage. This will help you feel your diaphragm move as you breathe.





4. Breathe in slowly through your nose so that your stomach moves out against your hand. The hand on your chest should be as still as possible.
5. Tighten your stomach muscles, letting them fall inward as you exhale through pursed lips. The hand on your upper chest must remain as still as possible.

**Note:** At first, you may get tired while doing this exercise because extra effort will be needed to use the diaphragm correctly. With continued practice, diaphragmatic breathing will become easy and automatic.

**How often should I practice this exercise?**

Practice this exercise 5-10 minutes about 3-4 times per day.

\*From the Cleveland Clinic Foundation.

**PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION (PMR)**

There are two steps in Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR): (a) deliberately tensing muscle groups; and then (b) releasing that muscle tension.

**Tension-Relaxation**

**STEP ONE: TENSION.**

Tense your muscle by first focusing your mind on the muscle group; for example, your right hand. Then inhale and simply squeeze the muscles as hard as you can for about 8 seconds. For example, make a tight fist with your hand. Feel a slight pull or burn in your fist.

**STEP TWO: RELEASING THE TENSION.**

After the 8 seconds, just let the muscle go. Let all the tightness flow out of the muscles as you simultaneously exhale. In the example of your hand, imagine tension flowing out of your hand through your fingertips as you exhale. Feel the muscles relax and become loose and limp, tension flowing away like water out of a faucet. Stay relaxed for about 15 seconds. Focus on and notice the difference between tension and relaxation. Repeat the tension-relaxation cycle with the same muscle. You'll probably notice more sensations the second time.

Use the above approach for most of the major muscle groups in your body. We recommend using the following sequence:

1. Hands and Arms
2. Head, Face, and Neck
3. Torso
4. Legs and Feet

**HANDS**

Inhale and tighten both hands into fists. Hold (8 seconds). Feel it spread up the arms towards the elbows. Exhale and relax, letting your fingers spread out naturally. (15 seconds)

**WRISTS AND FOREARMS**

Inhale and bend your right hand back at the wrist and briefly hold the tension. Hold (8 seconds) feeling the tension. Exhale and relax. (15 seconds)

Now do the same thing with the left hand. Inhale and bend your left hand back at the wrist and briefly hold the tension. Hold. Exhale and relax.

**ARMS**

Inhale and bend both arms at the elbows and raise your hands up towards your shoulders. Tighten up the muscles in the biceps. Hold. Exhale and relax, letting your arms drop down comfortably by your side.

**FOREHEAD**

Inhale and raise your eyebrows up as far as you can. Hold the tension. Exhale and relax. Now inhale and make a frown with your eyebrows. Try to pull your eyebrows down and close together. Hold the tension in your forehead. Exhale and relax.

**EYES**

Inhale and squeeze your eyelids tightly together. Hold. Exhale and relax.

**JAW**

Inhale and bite down and clamp your teeth together. Feel the tension along the jaw. Hold. Exhale and relax.





Now open your mouth and jaw as wide as you can. Hold. Exhale and relax.

**NECK**

Inhale and bend your head forward as if trying to touch your chin to your chest. Hold. Feel the tension along the back of the neck. Exhale and relax by bringing your head upright.

**SHOULDERS**

Inhale and raise your shoulders up as high as you can and notice the tension. Hold. Exhale and relax by letting your shoulders drop.

**CHEST**

Inhale and try to touch your shoulder blades together by pulling your arms and shoulders back. Hold. Exhale and relax.

**STOMACH**

Inhale and pull your stomach in as if trying to touch your backbone with stomach. Hold. Exhale and relax.

**BACK**

Inhale and arch your back out and away from the chair. Hold. Feel the tension along the spine. Exhale and relax.

**FEET**

Inhale and curl your toes under your feet. Feel the tension in your toes and through the bottom of your foot. Hold. Exhale and relax.

**LOWER LEGS AND FEET**

Inhale and bend your toes up as if pointing towards the ceiling. Hold. Feel the tension around the feet and ankles. Exhale and relax.

**THIGHS**

Inhale and raise your leg up on front of you and feel the tension build. Hold. Exhale and relax. (Most people lift one thigh at a time. Do not raise both legs if you feel a lot of tension in your back.)

**BUTTOCKS**

Inhale and squeeze the muscles in your buttocks. Hold. Exhale and relax.

**ENTIRE LEGS**

With your feet flat on the floor, inhale and press down and feel the tension spread up the back of the legs. Hold. Exhale and relax.

**FINAL STEP**

In your mind, scan your body for signs of tension or muscle discomfort. Tense and relax those areas. (Hold for 8 seconds, relax for 15 seconds). When you are finished, slowly open your eyes and try to maintain this more relaxed physical posture.

**GUIDED IMAGERY**



Vividly imagining yourself in a state of relaxation can help you to achieve that goal. One way to do this is by picturing yourself in a place where you are completely relaxed and at ease. Create an image in your mind that is as detailed as possible—this will make it feel more real. Picture yourself in your favored place completely relaxed. Conjure up sights and smells, sounds and feelings, tastes, and touch. The more senses you can involve in your imagining, the more clear the picture will be and this will help you achieve the same state of relaxation that you are remembering. Sometimes when you are trying to use this approach, thoughts from your day will intrude. Perhaps you will start thinking about





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errands you have to do or phone calls you are supposed to make. Allow these thoughts to come up and then calmly put them to one side and return your attention to your imagined scene. You can get to these tasks when you have finished the relaxation exercise.

### How often should I practice this exercise?

Practice this exercise 5-10 minutes once a day. This is also a nice exercise to do if you are having trouble falling asleep. Even if you don't fall asleep, you will be resting and relaxing in a positive frame of mind.

**Note:** Combinations of these exercises are also possible. For example, you could imagine being

at the beach and breathing the cool air—use diaphragmatic breathing while maintaining this image. Or you could picture pushing your heels into the warm, grainy sand—push down with your heels and feel the tension as you stretch the back of your legs and then the relaxation as you let go.

**Regardless of what is challenging your emotional health, the techniques above may be helpful in improving how you feel when you are feeling stressed and upset. Although practicing these techniques will not be a cure to your problem or stress, they can help in managing the impact negative emotions have on your health and help you to feel better.**

This document was developed by the War Related Illness & Injury Study Center (WRIISC)  
Office of Public Health (OPH)  
Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)  
Last Updated: March 2014

