

TECHNIQUES FOR RELAXING THE MIND AND BODY

Conquering Compassion Fatigue

A powerful prevention tool you can use in conquering compassion fatigue is relaxation techniques. The relaxation techniques below are ones you can do on a regular basis to combat both the acute and chronic reactions experienced with compassion fatigue.

Guided imagery

Guided imagery is a method in which you use your imagination to direct your thoughts to a peaceful, relaxing place. Because of the way the mind and body are connected, when you use your senses to imagine a scene, you feel and react as if you were actually there. For example, if you are imagining a meadow in the morning, you might feel the crisp, cool morning air. As the sun rises, you feel the warmth on your face. You see the dew sparkling in the sunlight, hear birds chirping, and smell the wildflowers. As you go through this imagery, your mind and body respond as if it were real—they relax.

To try guided imagery, follow these steps:

- > Find a comfortable place to sit or lie down. Close your eyes.
- > Start by taking a few deep breaths to help you relax.
- > Picture a setting that is calm and peaceful. This could be a beach, a mountain setting, a meadow, or any other that is pleasing to you.
- > Imagine your scene, and try to add some detail. For example, is there a breeze? What does the sky look like? Is it clear, or are there clouds?
- > It often helps to add a path to your scene. For example, as you enter the meadow, imagine a path leading you through the tall grass to the trees on the other side. As you follow the path farther into the meadow you feel more and more relaxed.
- > When you are deep in your scene and are feeling relaxed, take a few minutes to breathe slowly and feel the calm.
- > When you are ready, slowly take yourself out of the scene back to the present. Tell yourself that you will feel relaxed and refreshed and will bring that sense of calm with you.
- > Count to 3, and open your eyes.

It may help to have an audio recording to follow. You can make one of your own voice, buy one, or find one on the internet.

Breathing exercises

Breathing exercises are one of the simplest ways to relax. This is partly because breathing slowly and rhythmically makes your body feel like it does when you are already relaxed, and this sends a message to your brain to calm down and relax. It also relaxes you by clearing the mind of other thoughts, as you focus on your breathing. Here are several different breathing exercises:

Belly breathing

Belly breathing is quick and easy. It's a good one to start with.

- > Sit in a comfortable position.
- > Put one hand on your belly just below your ribs and the other hand on your chest.
- > Take a deep breath in through your nose, and let your belly push your hand out. Your chest shouldn't move.
- > Then exhale through your mouth, letting your belly hand go back in.
- > Do this 5 to 10 times. Take your time with each breath.

4-7-8 breathing

This exercise also uses belly breathing to help you relax. You can do this either sitting or lying down.

- > To start, put one hand on your belly and the other on your chest as in the belly breathing exercise.
- > Take a deep, slow breath from your belly, and silently count to 4 as you breathe in.
- > Hold your breath while you silently count from 1 to 7.
- > Breathe out slowly as you silently count from 1 to 8. Try to get all the air out of your lungs by the time you count to 8.
- > Repeat 3 to 7 times or until you feel calm.

Rolling breathing

The object of rolling breathing is to develop full use of your lungs and to focus on the rhythm of your breathing. You can do it in any position. However, while you are learning, it is best to lie on your back with your knees bent.

- > Put your left hand on your belly and your right hand on your chest. Notice how your hands move as you breathe in and out.
- > Practice filling your lower lungs by breathing so that your "belly" (left) hand goes up as you inhale and your "chest" (right) hand remains still. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Do 8 to 10 times.
- > When you have filled and emptied your lower lungs 8 to 10 times, add the second step to your breathing: Inhale first into your lower lungs as before, and then continue inhaling into your upper chest. As you do so, your right hand will rise and your left hand will fall a little as your belly falls.
- > As you exhale slowly through your mouth, make a quiet, whooshing sound as first your left hand and then your right hand fall. As you exhale, feel the tension leaving your body as you become more and more relaxed.
- > Practice breathing in and out this way for 3 to 5 minutes. Notice that the movement of your belly and chest rises and falls like the motion of rolling waves.

Practice rolling breathing daily for several weeks until you can do it almost anywhere. You can use it as an instant relaxation tool anytime you need one.

Pleasant words

Inhale deeply through your nose, and as you exhale say a chosen word or phrase to yourself (for example, peace, calm, I am valuable). Repeat 3–5 times.

Progressive muscle relaxation

This technique relaxes the body by first contracting and then releasing each of the main muscle groups of the body. This point-counterpoint procedure helps you relax more deeply and quickly than just releasing the muscles.

To do progressive relaxation you can create your own audiotape to help you go through all the muscle groups, or you can just learn the procedure from the table below and work through them from memory.

- > Choose a place where you can lie down on your back and stretch out comfortably, such as a carpeted floor or an exercise mat.
- > Inhale and tense each muscle group (hard but not to the point of cramping) for 5 to 10 seconds, then exhale and suddenly relax the muscle group completely. Give yourself 10 to 20 seconds to relax, and then do the next group.
- > When you finish all the muscle groups, return to alertness by counting backwards slowly from 5 to 1.

Muscle group	What to do
Hands	Clench them in fists.
Wrists and forearms	Extend them, and bend your hands back at the wrist.
Biceps and upper arms	Clench your hands into fists, bend arms at the elbows, flex your biceps.
Shoulders	Shrug them (raise them toward your ears).
Forehead	Wrinkle it into a deep frown.
Around the eyes and bridge of the nose	Close your eyes as tightly as you can. (Remove contact lenses or glasses before you start the exercise).
Cheeks and jaws	Smile as widely as you can.
Around the mouth	Press your lips together tightly.
Back of the neck	Press the back of your head against the floor.
Front of the neck	Touch chin to chest. (Try not to create tension in your neck and head).
Chest	Take a deep breath, and hold it for 5 to 10 seconds.
Back	Arch your back up and away from the floor.
Stomach	Suck it into a tight knot.
Hips and buttocks	Press your buttocks together tightly.
Thighs	Clench your thighs together tightly.
Lower legs	Point your toes toward your face. Then point your toes away, and curl them downward at the same time.

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