

Relaxation Exercises

What are relaxation exercises and why are they important?

Relaxation techniques and exercises can help women and girls feel in control or regain control of their bodies and calm their minds from intrusive thoughts and feelings. Women and girls may have a lot of different emotional and psychological reactions to violence and abuse (e.g. anger, anxiety, stress). Relaxation exercises when practiced can ensure that women and girls have increased ability to manage their stress-related symptoms.

Relaxation exercises can be incorporated into group psychosocial (PSS) sessions and demonstrated and practiced within case management sessions. Within case management sessions they can be used to help women get comfortable prior to speaking or be used within a session if a woman finds that she needs to take time out to reduce the tension in her body and mind.

What are examples of relaxation exercises?

Chair Yoga

Seated Neck Rolls

Sit up straight in a chair. Gaze up to the ceiling, keeping your neck long. Bring your left ear down toward your left shoulder and hold. Roll your head down toward the ground and bring your chin to your chest and hold. Roll your head to the right and bring that ear to your right shoulder. Inhale and exhale through the nose in a slow and controlled manner. Repeat twice.

Seated Mountain Pose

Sit up straight in a chair. Roll your shoulder blades up, back and down, arms relaxed at your sides. Pull your belly button in to your spine to engage your abdominal muscles, and keep your feet flat on the floor, if possible. Inhale through the nose and raise your arms overhead. Keep your arms shoulder width apart, and relax your shoulders. If you feel your shoulders creep up around your ears, relax them. Gaze in between your hands, to the ceiling. Stay here for five breaths.

Seated Eagle Arms

Sit up straight in a chair. Roll your shoulder blades up, back and down, arms relaxed at your sides. Pull your belly button in to your spine to engage your abdominal muscles, and keep your feet flat on the floor, if possible. Extend your arms out in front of you at 90-degree angles, palms facing each other.



Place your right arm under your left and press the backs of your palms together. Inhale and sit tall, then exhale and tuck your chin to your chest to stretch the back of the neck. Hold the pose for five breaths, then switch arms and stay for another five breaths.

Seated Forward Fold

Sit up straight in a chair. Roll your shoulder blades up, back and down, arms relaxed at your sides. Pull your belly button in toward your spine to engage your abdominal muscles, and keep your feet flat on the floor, if possible. Spread your legs slightly wider than hip distance apart. Exhale and hinge from the hips, slowly lowering your hands to the floor (or in contact with your thighs or shins). Slowly round your upper back, lowering your chest in between your legs and relaxing your head and neck down. Allow your shoulders to relax and round. Stay here for five breaths. Inhale and slowly roll up, lifting your head up last.

Seated Cat/Cow

Sit up straight in a chair. Roll your shoulder blades up, back and down, arms relaxed at your sides. Pull your belly button in to your spine to engage your abdominal muscles, and keep your feet flat on the floor, if possible. As you inhale, arch your back (leading with the chest) and look up toward the ceiling. Lift the chin and allow your arms to relax next to you. As you exhale, round your spine and let your head drop forward. Tuck the chin and allow your shoulders to roll. Repeat five times, moving fluidly from cat to cow with each breath.

Standing Forward Fold with Chair

Begin by standing about an arm's length behind a chair. Your feet should be directly under your hips; your shoulders should be back and down, with your abdominal muscles engaged. Inhale and reach for the chair, allowing your body to roll down. Bend your knees slightly to prevent locking them, and allow the head to hang. Stay for five breaths, and then roll up slowly.

Seated Forward Bend with Chair

Sit on the floor in front of your chair with your legs extended in front of you, under the chair. Keep the chair close enough to your body that you can touch it with your hands when the arms are outstretched. Pull your belly in to your spine to engage your abdominal muscles and flex your feet to engage your legs. (Bend your knees if you cannot straighten them.) Hinge from the hip to place your hands/forearms onto the chair, and then allow your chin to drop toward your chest and your upper back to round slightly forward. Stay here for five to 10 breaths, then slowly roll your chin and chest up.

Deep Breathing

Imagine you have a balloon inside your stomach. Place one hand below your belly button, and breathe in slowly through the nose for four seconds, feeling the balloon fill up with air – your belly should expand. When the balloon is full,

slowly breathe out through your mouth for about four seconds. Your hand will rise and fall as the balloon fills and empties. Wait 2 seconds, then release. Repeat a few times. When belly breathing, make sure the upper body (shoulders and chest area) is fairly relaxed and still.

Visualization

Find a quiet place and close your eyes. Think of the most calm, peaceful place you have ever been. Picture yourself in that place. Describe what it: Looks like, sounds like, Smells like, Feels like. Think of all the small details, like the breeze, the feeling of the grass or whatever else might be in your space. Imagine yourself in the place and breathe deeply for several breaths. Return here when you are feeling stressed or worried.

Muscle Relaxation

Make a fist with each hand and squeeze each hand tight. Squeeze... Squeeze... Squeeze...and Relax. Now, while you squeeze your fists again, tighten your arms to squeeze your body, squeeze... Squeeze... Squeeze... Relax. Now, this time also squeeze your legs together while making a fist and squeezing your arms together, squeeze... Squeeze... Squeeze... Relax. Repeat. Shake out your hands, arms and legs.

If you have the time, you can do this exercise by individual muscle group – i.e. starting with the left foot, left calf, left thigh, left buttock, moving to the right leg, then left hand, arm, shoulder, right arm, then then back, face, etc.

Sculpting

If in a group, one group member volunteers to be the sculptor, while several other group members volunteer to be the “clay.” The “Sculptor” is asked to sculpt their image of a particularly stressful situation. The Sculptor does not tell the story, but rather asks the volunteers to assume positions that represent the stressful experience. The Sculptor can then join in and become part of the sculpture. Other group members are invited to gather around and view the “sculpture” and describe what they see. The leader then asks those serving as clay to break the position.

The Sculptor is then asked to “sculpt” their image of “freedom from the stress” – using the same volunteers. The Sculptor can then enter the sculpture, as well. Once again, other group members are invited to gather around and describe what they see. The leader then asks the volunteers to break the position.

Finally, the leader asks the volunteers to assume the original position (of stress), and – as the leader slowly counts to 10 – slowly transform the original sculpture of stress into the second sculpture of freedom from stress.

The leader asks all to return to their seats, and de-briefs the experience with participants, asking what it was like for them to assume the original position,

how it felt in their bodies, etc. and how it then felt to move into the freedom from stress position.

Give Yourself a Hand or Foot Massage

Try a DIY hand massage for instant relaxation that can calm down heart rate and bring focus away from a myriad of other thoughts and back to yourself. Hands and feet in general can carry a lot of tension so it can be of benefit to apply some hand lotion and start gently kneading your big thumb or big toe and work your way along and then to your palms/soles.

Drip Cold Water on Your Wrists

When stress hits, head for the bathroom and drop some cold water on your wrists and behind your earlobes. There are major arteries right underneath the skin, so cooling these areas can help calm the whole body.

Do's	Don'ts
Try to ensure sufficient space for the exercise(s) you will be practicing	Force individuals to participate in relaxation exercises if they are not ready and willing to participate.
Try to ensure that the area is calm and quiet	Group relaxation exercises that involving touching others should be avoided so that survivors personal space is respected
Do try to focus on your breathing, slowing down and focusing on yourself and your needs during the relaxation exercise.	Get frustrated if you find it difficult to relax at all. Stick with it and it will get easier with time.
Do try to set aside a regular time for your relaxation practice as this will help you to make it routine and maximize the benefits of the practice.	If intrusive or unwelcome thoughts trouble you whilst trying to relax, acknowledge them and then try to detach yourself from them by saying you will not let them be your focus for the short time you are dedicating to your relaxation.
Do consider what is culturally appropriate and acceptable in the context where you are practicing your relaxation.	Don't expect to see radical changes immediately. The positive changes may be small and incremental.

