



Worksheet

Switching on your relaxation response

Switching on your relaxation response helps focus your mind on thoughts or actions that feel good – interrupting stressful thoughts and feelings. This worksheet introduces breathing and muscle techniques that have been shown to be particularly helpful for relaxation.^{1,2,3}

Relax | Whakatā is one of the **Three Rs** that allow you to reduce things that trigger your stress response. Turning on our relaxation response puts a brake on the physical changes in our body, produced by the **stress response**.

Activities such as breath focus, guided imagery, mindfulness meditation, yoga, Tai Chi or qigong and repetitive prayer/karakia have all been shown to be particularly helpful for relaxation.

There are many activities that can provide a similar focus, such as group singing, waiata, dancing, martial arts, kapa haka, prayer, mōteatea, playing music, sports, walking in nature, swimming, knitting, raranga (weaving) and other crafts.

Relaxation exercises

The short exercises on the following pages can be practised anywhere without special equipment or training to create a change in the physical response your body has to stress. Practice them at times when you have no or low stress. That way they'll also be more effective at those times when your stress levels are running high and you need relief, fast!

Tips to finding the right activity:

- It provides a mind/body connection where you are present in the moment
- It brings enjoyment, peace and refuels you
- Try more than one activity and find the ones that work best for you
- Take notice of the things that refuel you. This can help you identify activities
- Put aside 10-20 mins a day to focus on relaxation - this helps reduce the build-up of stress on the body
- Try something that can be practised anywhere without special equipment or training.
- Give it a go. Even short exercises can have a positive impact
- Activities and techniques become easier with regular practice (several times a day, each day)

If you are experiencing high levels of stress for a period of time, or having symptoms that concern you, seek support from someone you trust. If experiencing health concerns, speak to a health professional.

Activity One:

Basic deep breathing

Deep breathing, also called belly breathing, helps you calm down and bring your focus into the present moment. With deep breathing you are expanding your abdomen or belly to draw in air. If you find your shoulders rising and falling, try and practise belly breathing by expanding your stomach so that you fill your lungs.

In these two versions, there is a sequence of four breaths that can be repeated one or more times.

Make sure you stay comfortable at the pace and timing of your breath. You do not have to stick rigidly to any suggested counts.

This activity becomes easier with regular practice (several times a day, each day) and only takes a short time to do.

While seated: (aim for four breaths at least)

1. Close your eyes (or if uncomfortable closing eyes, lower your focus) and place your hands gently on your stomach so you can feel your breathing.
2. Inhale through your nose – feel your stomach expand.
3. Pause then exhale slowly through your mouth and puckered lips until you empty your lungs.
4. Try and breath rhythmically, e.g. while counting to four breathe in – pause – breathe out while counting to four. Counting can also help keep your attention on your breath and the exercise rather than other thoughts.
5. As you take each breath out try to relax your body a little bit more. If there is one area that is very tense, focus on that.
6. To finish on your fourth or last breath give a large sigh and let your body relax into your chair. Relax with a few normal breaths then open your eyes slowly.

Standing with movement:

This activity is in four steps with arm movement on each inhale. Remember to inhale through your nose.

1. Stand comfortably with your feet slightly apart and arms at your sides.
2. First inhale through your nose and slowly exhale – feel your shoulder drop and your feet press into the floor as you relax.
3. Second inhale – raise your arms in front of you to shoulder level – exhale slowly.
4. Third inhale – spread your arms to your sides at shoulder level – exhale slowly.
5. Forth inhale – raise your arms over your head so your palms meet. Turn your palms out and on the slow exhale lower your arms to your sides. If you exhale making a “hā” sound on this last exhale – you will relax your face muscles. Notice your shoulders should drop and feet press into the floor.
6. Relax for a few normal breaths, being present in the moment.

Activity two:

Guided breathing

This method works by initiating the relaxation response through focusing your attention on deep breathing and calming thoughts, and interrupting stressful thoughts. If you notice your mind wanders, gently notice this as you breathe and return your attention to your breath and calming focus.

1. Choose a calming focus – something you find soothing and calm, e.g.:
 - Your breathing
 - A sound you say out loud like “OM”
 - A short prayer or karakia
 - A positive word like “peace”, “relax”, “aroha”
 - A phrase that reflects your intent, for example ‘Breathe in calm, breathe out tension, ‘hā ki roto, hā ki waho’ or simply ‘I am relaxed’
1. Repeat your sound, karakia, word or phrase out loud or silently as you breathe in or out.
2. Stay connected with your breath and calming focus, and let go and relax.

Activity three:

Progressive muscle relaxation

This method helps relieve the tension we physically feel when experiencing stress and helps reduce the feelings of stress and anxiety that can accompany this. You can do this almost anywhere and it can be done without anyone really noticing. The exercise gets you to focus on the sensations of tensing and releasing the muscles in one part of your body at a time. If your focus wanders, just bring it back slowly to the way you feel as you tense and release your muscles.

1. Find a comfortable spot sitting or lying down. Try to deep breathe as you do this.
2. Starting at your toes, tense your muscles for ten seconds – paying attention to the feeling, then release for 10 seconds – noticing the sensations.
3. Move up your body through each set of muscles to your shoulders, then your arms, back to your neck. Don't forget your face tensing and relaxing your mouth and eyes.
4. Hold each for ten seconds.

Make sure you stay comfortable and adjust the activity to suit your situation and body. Remember to focus on one set of muscles at a time and try and leave the other groups relaxed.

For more relaxation approaches, [Getting help and advice](#) fact sheet.