The Benefits of Relaxation Techniques for People with ADHD

by ERIC PATTERSON

How to Relax with ADHD

You wake up. You scramble to get yourself and your family out the door to school and work. Certainly, work is stressful as you try to please your boss and make small talk with your coworkers. You come home to relationships and responsibilities that demand your focus. By the time dinner is over and the kids are in bed, you just want to relax. So, you plop on the couch, turn on the TV and dive into a bag of potato chips.

The cycle starts over again the next day, and despite the relaxation, you feel more drained, more distracted and more stuck in your routine. When people arrive at this point, they begin to find ways to modify home life, or they take a vacation day from work. These measures are largely unsuccessful because the issue is less about the activities and more about the relaxation.

Relaxation is such an important aspect of your life. It is also something that is performed at less than adequate levels. People with attention-deficit/ hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) are especially vulnerable to poor relaxation skills. They often seek out video games, TV, movies and computers in the name of relaxation, but the stimuli prevent your mind from slowing down. This causes physical and mental fatigue.

Benefits of Relaxation

Before you have a chance to be successful with relaxation, you must believe in the process. Here are some of the benefits you can find with relaxation:

- Improve your mood and lower your stress.
- Improve your memory and decision-making skills.
- Lower blood pressure and improve your cardiovascular health.
- Help you achieve goals and desired changes in your life.
- Boost your immune system to prevent illnesses.
- Prepare you for an important performance or event.
- Add a sense of self-control and independence in your life.

The positive effects of relaxation are far-reaching and highly desirable. Most of the improvements come from the lowered stress levels that people achieve through relaxation. When stress is low, you will be less impacted by your ADHD since your memory and impulsivity will be operating at higher levels. This illustrates how relaxation's benefit carries on throughout the day.

Barriers to Relaxation

Generally, people who are new to relaxation will struggle to find the above benefits. Having ADHD, you will likely have more difficulty than others.

When you think about it, relaxation is the absence of stimulation. Typically, people with ADHD are more interested in activities that provide as much stimulation as possible. People with ADHD have many complaints about relaxation, including:

- Relaxation is boring. It's true that relaxation is not the constant stimulation of a video game, but consider the notion that boring can be good.
- Relaxation is uncomfortable. Many people are constantly engaging in activities to avoid reality or escape from stressors altogether. Escape and avoidance are fine in moderation, but too much builds stress. Relaxation is a rarely-used muscle. You will feel sore for a while.
- Relaxation doesn't work. Relaxation is a skill that needs to be developed. Could you ride a bike the first time you tried? No. It took practice and hard work. Relaxation is no different.
- I don't need to relax/I don't have time. Chances are good that you have many stressors in your life that build up. Relaxation can help reduce the unwanted effects of past stressors while softening the blow of future stressors. Most relaxations can be done in less time than it takes to watch one sitcom.

Barrier-Busters

Since there are barriers in place, you need ways to break through the walls impeding your relaxation. Here's how:

Use Them More Often

People with ADHD, anxiety or high stress can make up their minds too quickly on relaxation techniques; trying a breathing exercise for 10 minutes on several occasions is not enough.
Like most things worth doing, relaxation techniques are difficult. You may need months to become proficient at even the simplest diaphragmatic breathing technique but with practice comes improvement.

Schedule the Time

Your ADHD makes it difficult to spontaneously think about relaxation in the midst of a busy day. Set reminders on your phone or watch to give you the time needed to relax. What you were doing can wait, relaxation is more important.

Next Page: More barrier-busters, and additional information on how to relax with ADHD.

Change the Time

Maybe first thing in the morning or last thing at night is not the best time for you to schedule relaxation. Do not give up. Keep trying.

Try lunchtime, during a commercial of your favorite show, between online matches of your favorite video game or after you talk to your best friend on the phone.

With different times of day, try different lengths of time. Some people may find benefit after five minutes. Maybe you need 25 minutes since your ADHD keeps distracting you. Focus on what is going to be best for you.

Change the Setting

Variety will be your friend when learning relaxation. Testing different areas will allow you to compare and contrast the strengths and weaknesses of each location.
Try the bedroom, bathroom, closet or living room floor. You can put on some music and light candles or enjoy perfect silence in a pitch-dark room.

Focus on Prevention

Typically, beginners wait too long to use a relaxation technique. Relaxation cannot be practiced during a high-stress period where attention is unavailable. When you are a beginner, you must practice these techniques during periods of low stress and low ADHD symptoms.

This strategy will better prepare you for future stress because you will master the skills under ideal conditions.

What to Do

Relaxation comes in many shapes and sizes. Avoid the desire to do what is comfortable and find actions that stretch your tolerance for peaceful serenity. Activities can include taking a long bath, going on a nature walk and almost anything else that quiets your mind. Here are some of the best options for people with ADHD:

Exercise

Exercise can give you the right type and amount of stimulation. Engaging in activities like running, swimming, biking, yoga, and dancing are great due to their repetitive nature. This repetition can create a meditative state that calms your mind.

The physical activity is an added bonus as it will burn off some of the excess energy left by ADHD while filling your brain with desirable neurotransmitters.

Deep Breathing

Deep breathing is the simplest and most basic skill. To practice deep breathing, assume a comfortable position either sitting or laying down. Put your right hand on your stomach and left hand on your chest. As you breathe in, feel your right hand moving while your left remains still. The goal is to fill your lungs entirely by using your diaphragm to suck in air — most people move their shoulders when breathing deeply but this only partially fills the lungs.

Work to extend the seconds you spend inhaling and exhaling. Five seconds in and 7 seconds out is a great goal but three in and 5 out might be your starting point. Deep breathing provides access to extra oxygen which allows your heart to slow down. Repeat as needed.

Autogenic Training

Autogenics is a type of self-hypnosis where you repeat a series of phrases to yourself. A quick online search will yield great scripts to use as a guide. Autogenics allows for modification and manipulation to obtain your desired effect.

Appropriate phrases for ADHD include: “My mind is calm,” “My mind is clear,” and “I can stay calm.” These messages work to retrain your thinking to be more desirable while training your body to be more relaxed. This relaxation is ideal for people with ADHD because it does not ask you to quiet your mind. Instead, you fill it with helpful thoughts.

Guided Imagery

Guided imagery involves listening to a script or reading a script yourself. Scripts often involve thinking about yourself on a tropical island or a relaxing destination from your past. The imagery works to distract you from your stressors and allows your mind and body to become refreshed.

Incorporate as many senses as you can into your imagination to get a greater benefit.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PRM)

PRM begins by taking a few moments to listen to your body. Which areas are feeling tight? Which areas feel

loose and relax? From there, target your tight spots by squeezing and tensing the muscles of that area and then releasing them.

Repeating the progress in other areas lets you notice the difference between tension and relaxation. Adding awareness permits you to decrease the tension more often and more effectively.

Conclusion

When people think of ADHD, they don’t often think of relaxation. It is a shame, though, since everyone needs relaxation with its many benefits.

Now is the time to trade in your video game controller for a yoga mat, or your smartphone for the peace of guided imagery. Relaxation at last.