

Progressive Muscle Relaxation for Children and Adolescents

When talking to younger children, use a simple definition of stress:

“Stress is the feeling of being out of control.”

The main presenting symptoms of stress in children and adolescents I have seen are:

- ∂ Excessive headaches, nausea and abdominal pain
- ∂ Tendency to worry a lot
- ∂ Low self-esteem
- ∂ Sleep disturbances
- ∂ Excessive anger
- ∂ Moodiness
- ∂ Difficulty with concentration
- ∂ Having a delicate equilibrium/being easily upset

To help reduce stress levels, regain confidence and promote a sense of being in control. There are a number of simple techniques that children and adolescents can learn. These include breathing awareness, progressive muscle relaxation and visualization. Breathing awareness can be practiced almost anywhere and at anytime, and can ideally be used several times a day. After the body is relaxed with the progressive muscle relaxation exercise, there is a visualization that deepens the relaxation of the mind. For best results, they can be combined in a daily practice session.

Breathing Awareness

When our stress levels rise, our breathing speeds up and becomes shallower. Becoming aware of our breathing, slowing down and deepen each breath will allow us to feel more relaxed. Becoming aware of our breathing is a simple strategy. Two favorite breathing techniques are abdominal breathing and sigh of breath.

- Abdominal breathing is a useful breathing technique. It may take a little to practice to master but be patient and it will happen. Place one hand on your tummy so that the belly button is below the center of the palm. Now place the other hand on top of that first hand. Take a slow deep breath in and imagine the diaphragm, a large band of muscle below your lungs, moving down as your lungs expand and causing your tummy to rise gently under your hands. As you breathe out, your lungs contract. The diaphragm moves back up and you can feel your tummy gently fall. Breathe in slowly and deeply, feel your tummy rise. Breathe out slowly and feel your tummy fall. Don't force your breathing, just make it deeper and slower. Continue breathing in this manner for at least 10 to 20 cycles.
- Sigh breathing involves taking a moderately deep breath in through your nose and pausing only briefly, let the air out slowly through your nose. The slow gentle exhale is the key to sigh breathing. Be sure to lengthen your outward breath. Now, as you breathe out, let go---relax your muscles of your face, your jaw and your shoulders. Let go of tension in your chest and stomach. Let your arms and legs relax. As you breathe out, feel a wave of relaxation flow from the top of your head and all the way down to your feet. Continue to breathe in this manner for at least 10 to 20 cycles.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Progressive Muscle Relaxation is a technique that relaxes the body progressively as you focus on different muscle groups in the body. For beginners to highlight the difference between a tensed state and a relaxed state there is a simple tensing exercise:

- Point your fingers and toes while stretching all the muscles in your arms and legs. Really feel the stretch and hold. Big breath in and as you breath out, relax the muscles and allow your whole body to soften and relax.
- Bend your knees towards your chest and wrap your arms around your knees. Curl yourself up in a ball shape bringing your head forward towards your knees. Tighten the muscles and hold the ball shape. Now take a deep breath in and as you breath out, uncurl your body and relax the muscles. Allow your whole body to soften and relax feeling soft and relaxed like a sleep cat.
- Focus on specific muscle groups relaxing those muscles before moving on to the next group.
For example:

Focus your attention on your feet, toes, and ankles. As you breathe in, imagine your breath flowing all the way down to your toes and as you breathe out, let go of any tightness, tension and discomfort. Allow the muscles to relax and soften.

- Focus on your calf muscles. As you breathe in, imagine your breathe flowing all the way down to your calf muscles. As you breath out relaxing the calf muscles, let go of any tightness and tension.

Visualization

Visualization is thinking in pictures, images and sensations. Visualization is a powerful technique as it enlists the imagination to problem solve, provide a haven to calm and nurture the soul and stimulate creativity. Visualization is very absorbing and tends to stop or slow down the “chatter of the mind” giving time out from everyday worries, concerns and negative thoughts. Ideally, visualization is introduced after progressive muscle relaxation so you relax the body and then relax the mind.

The following is a simple example of visualization:

- ∂ Imagine there is a butterfly sitting on your chest. It has wings spread and it is preparing to take flight.
- ∂ It seems more and more likely to do so every time you breath in and out, but it remains sitting on your chest for some time.
- ∂ Look at this butterfly carefully. Examine its color and shape.
- ∂ Soon the butterfly will take flight. Imagine following the butterfly to a pleasant place where you feel relaxed, comfortable and safe.
- ∂ Pay careful attention to the sights, sounds, smells and sensations of this place...how it feels and how you feel being there.
- ∂ Allow yourself to enjoy being there and to relax as fully as possible. You have 1 minute to enjoy this place and it is all the time you need.
- ∂ Remember that you carry this peaceful place inside you and you can come here and visit any time you wish.