

Mindfulness Meditation Group

Letting Go Week 2

Relaxing our attachment to particular thoughts, feelings, and experiences. When we let go of efforts to prolong or re-create what is pleasant, or efforts to eliminate what is unpleasant, we accept whatever is here in the present moment.

“People have a hard time letting go of their suffering. Out of a fear of the unknown, they prefer suffering that is familiar.”

-Thich Nhat Hanh

“Letting go naturally happens when we are just here now, in the moment.”

-Gina Lake



Progressive Muscle Relaxation

PMR is a technique for achieving a deep state of relaxation. It involves tensing and releasing different muscle groups throughout your body. Regular practice of PMR once a day will produce significant reduction in your overall level of stress and anxiety.

PMR helps with stress and anxiety associated with muscle tension, tension headaches, backaches, tightness in the jaw, tightness around the eyes, high blood pressure, and insomnia. PMR helps with racing thoughts by slowing down the mind. It's very difficult for an anxious mind to exist in a relaxed body.

Tense various muscle groups for about 5 seconds, and then let go. Notice how the muscle group feels when it's relaxed versus when it was tense before moving on to the next muscle group.

- To begin, take 3 deep abdominal breaths, exhaling slowly each time. As you exhale, imagine that tension throughout your body begins to flow away.
- Tense your triceps and hands by stretching out both arms and clenching both fists tightly. Hold the tension...and then slowly release.
- Tense your biceps by bending your elbows and tensing your biceps as much as you can. Just observe the feeling of tightness. Hold... and relax, straightening your arms and allowing them to relax into the support of chair or floor. Let relaxation spread, feel the difference.
- Tense the muscles in your forehead by raising your eyebrows as far as you can. Hold... and then relax. Imagine your forehead muscles becoming smooth and limp as they relax.
- Tense the muscles around your eyes by clenching your eyelids tightly shut. Hold... and then relax. Imagine sensations of deep relaxation spreading all around the eye area
- Tighten your jaws by opening your mouth widely so you stretch the muscles around the hinges of your jaw. Hold... and then relax. Let your lips apart, allow your jaw to hang loose.
- Tighten your shoulders by raising them up as if you were going to touch your ears. Hold... and then relax, dropping your shoulders, feel relaxation spread through your neck, throat, shoulders.
- Tighten the upper back muscles by sitting slightly forward, bend your elbows, and try to get them to touch one another behind your back, drawing your shoulder blades in towards one another. Hold... and then relax
- Tense your lower back by arching it very slightly without straining. Hold... feeling the tension... and then relax. Imagine loosening the lower back and pelvic muscles, feel yourself sink deeper into the chair or floor, letting go of all the tension in this area.
- Tense you glutes and thighs by tightening and squeezing these muscles together. Hold... and then relax.
- Tighten your feet by curling your toes downward, making your calves tense. Study the tension. Hold... and then relax.
- Tighten your calf muscles by bending your toes toward your face, creating tension in your shins. Hold... and then relax again, enjoying the feeling of heaviness that spreads throughout your legs.

- Scan your body for any last bit of tension. If a particular area remains tense, repeat the tense-relax cycle for that group of muscles. Feel yourself heavier and heavier, more and more deeply relaxed. Now imagine a wave of relaxation slowly spreading throughout your body, starting at your head and gradually penetrating every muscle group all the way down to your toes. Every cell is relaxed, calm, and quiet. Your legs and arms are heavy and relaxed, your face is smooth and relaxed, your jaw hangs loosely, and your shoulders release downward and relax. Take another deep breath, and as you exhale fully and slowly, allow your body to sink deeply into the safe support of the chair or floor.

Integrating Relaxation into your day: Common Obstacles and Excuses

“I just don’t have time to relax.”

This usually means that you haven’t given relaxation enough priority among all the other activities you’ve crowded into your schedule.

“I don’t have any place to relax.”

Try creating one. If there is limited space or privacy in your house, then practice at a time when your housemate, roommate, or significant other is out of the house or asleep.

“Relaxation exercises seem too slow or boring.”

If you are telling yourself this, this is a good indication that you are too speeded up, too frantically pushing yourself through life. Slow down – it’s good for you.

“I feel more anxious when I relax.”

Not everyone finds “relaxing” relaxing. Some people experience increased restlessness or muscle tension, dizziness, sweating, pounding heart, or rapid breathing. Many people are so used to feeling “wire” or tense, that feeling relaxed may feel odd. Some causes of “relaxation-induced anxiety” include: 1. A reaction to new sensations: floating, heaviness, tingling, or muscle twitches. 2. Fear of loss of control. 3. Reluctance to observe inner sensations. 4. Surfacing of suppressed feelings and / or memories.

If you experience relaxation-induced anxiety, start off with relatively short periods of relaxation, working up gradually to longer time periods. The moment you start feeling any anxiety, simply open your eyes and stop whatever procedure you’re practicing until you feel better, or try switching to a different relaxation technique. With time, patience, and regular practice, strange and unpleasant sensations typically diminish. If such sensations are very intense or distressing, it would be helpful to meet with a counselor skilled in treating stress and anxiety to assist you in desensitizing yourself to relaxation.

“I just don’t have the discipline.”

This typically means that you haven’t persisted with practicing relaxation long enough to internalize it as a habit. You may have made similar statements to yourself in the past when you were attempting to acquire a new behavior. Brushing your teeth didn’t come naturally when you first started. It took some time and diligence to reach the point where it became a valuable habit.

If you make the effort to practice deep relaxation 3 to 5 days per week for a least one month, it will likely become so ingrained that you won’t need to think about doing anymore – you’ll just do it automatically.

Beach Visualization Relaxation

Get comfortable. Sit in a supportive chair or lie on your back.

Relax your body by releasing any areas of tension. Allow your arms to go limp... then your legs...

Feel your arms and legs becoming loose and relaxed...

Now relax your neck and back by relaxing your spine.... release the hold of your muscles all the way from your head, down your neck....along each vertebra to the tip of your spine...

Breathe deeply into your diaphragm, drawing air fully into your lungs.... and release the air with a whooshing sound....

Breathe in again, slowly.... pause for a moment.... and breathe out.....

Draw a deep breath in.... and out....

In..... out.....

Become more and more relaxed with each breath....

Feel your body giving up all the tension.... becoming relaxed.... and calm.... peaceful....

Feel a wave of relaxation flow from the soles of your feet, to your ankles, lower legs, hips, pelvic area, abdomen, chest, back, hands, lower arms, elbows, upper arms, shoulders, neck, back of your head, face, and the top of your head....

Allow your entire body to rest heavily on the surface where you sit or lie. Now that your body is fully relaxed, allow the visualization relaxation to begin.

Imagine you are walking toward the ocean.... walking through a beautiful, tropical forest....

You can hear the waves up ahead.... you can smell the ocean spray.... the air is moist and warm.... feel a pleasant, cool breeze blowing through the trees....

You walk along a path....coming closer to the sea....as you come to the edge of the trees, you see the brilliant aqua color of the ocean ahead....

You walk out of the forest and onto a long stretch of white sand.... the sand is very soft powder.... imagine taking off your shoes, and walking through the hot, white sand toward the water....

The beach is wide and long....

Hear the waves crashing to the shore....

Smell the clean salt water and beach....

You gaze again toward the water.... it is a bright blue-green....

See the waves washing up onto the sand.... and receding back toward the ocean.... washing up.... and flowing back down..... enjoy the ever-repeating rhythm of the waves...

Imagine yourself walking toward the water.... over the fine, hot sand.... you are feeling very hot....

As you approach the water, you can feel the mist from the ocean on your skin. You walk closer to the waves, and feel the sand becoming wet and firm....

A wave washes over the sand toward you.... and touches your toes before receding...

As you step forward, more waves wash over your feet... feel the cool water provide relief from the heat....

Walk further into the clear, clean water.... you can see the white sand under the water.... the water is a pleasant, relaxing temperature.... providing relief from the hot sun... cool but not cold....

You walk further into the water if you wish.... swim if you want to.... enjoy the ocean for a few minutes..... allow the visualization relaxation to deepen.... more and more relaxed... enjoy the ocean....

Now you are feeling calm and refreshed...

You walk back out of the water and onto the beach...

Stroll along the beach at the water's edge.... free of worries... no stress... calm..... enjoying this holiday....

Up ahead is a comfortable lounge chair and towel, just for you...

Sit or lie down in the chair, or spread the towel on the sand.... relax on the chair or towel.... enjoying the sun.... the breeze.... the waves.....

You feel peaceful and relaxed.... allow all your stresses to melt away....

When you are ready to return from your vacation, do so slowly....

Bring yourself back to your usual level of alertness and awareness....

Keep with you the feeling of calm and relaxation.... feeling ready to return to your day....

Open your eyes, stretch your muscles... and become fully alert... refreshed... and filled with energy.

You can practice this visualization relaxation as often as you wish, to provide a mental vacation whenever you need it. Visualization relaxation is a skill that can be learned; the more you practice, the more skilled you will become and more effectively you will be able to relax using visualization relaxation.

Forest Visualization Relaxation

Begin by finding a comfortable position sitting or lying down. Allow your body to begin to relax as you start to create a picture in your mind. Let the forest visualization begin.

Imagine yourself walking on a path through a forest. The path is soft beneath your shoes, a mixture of soil, fallen leaves, pine needles, and moss. As you walk, your body relaxes and your mind clears, more and more with each step you take.

Breathe in the fresh mountain air, filling your lungs completely. Now exhale. Breathe out all the air. Feeling refreshed.

Take another deep breath in...revitalizing.... and breathe out completely, letting your body relax further.

Continue to breathe slowly and deeply as you walk through the forest and continue the forest visualization.

The air is cool, but comfortable. Sun filters through the trees, making a moving dappled pattern on the ground before you.

Listen to the sounds of the forest.... Birds singing. A gentle breeze blowing. The leaves on the trees shift and sway in the soft wind.

Your body relaxes more and more as you walk. Count your steps and breathe in unison with your strides.

Breathe in 2, 3, 4... hold 2, 3...exhale 2, 3, 4, 5.

Breathe in 2, 3, 4... hold 2, 3...exhale 2, 3, 4, 5.

Breathe in 2, 3, 4... hold 2, 3...exhale 2, 3, 4, 5.

Continue to breathe like this, slowly and deeply, as you become more and more relaxed.

As you walk through the forest visualization, feel your muscles relaxing and lengthening. As your arms swing in rhythm with your walking, they become loose, relaxed, and limp.

Feel your back relaxing as your spine lengthens and the muscles relax. Feel the tension leaving your body as you admire the scenery around you.

Your legs and lower body relax as well, feeling free and relaxed.

As you continue to walk through the forest visualization, you begin to climb up a slight incline. You easily tread along smooth rocks on the path. Feeling at one with nature.

The breeze continues to blow through the treetops, but you are sheltered on the path, and the air around you is calm.

Small saplings grow at the sides of the path.

Around you is an immense array of greens. Some of the leaves on the trees are a delicate, light green. Some leaves are deep, dark, true forest green.

Many trees have needles that look very soft and very green. The forest floor is thick, green moss.

Tall trees grow on either side of the path. Picture the variety of trees around you. Some have smooth, white bark. Others are darker, with coarse, heavy bark, deeply grooved. Enjoy the colors of the bark on the trees - white, tan, brown, red, black... many combinations of color. You admire the rough, brown bark of pine trees and enjoy the fresh pine scent.

Smell the forest around you. The air is fresh, and filled with the scent of trees, soil, and mountain streams.

Continue the forest visualization...

You can hear the sound of water faintly in the distance. The gentle burbling sound of a creek.

As you continue to walk through the forest, you are gaining elevation and getting closer to the sound of a running stream.

Continue to enjoy the forest around you. Enjoy the forest visualization.

As you near the top of the mountain, you hear the stream, very close now. The path curves up ahead. You can see sunlight streaming onto the path.

As you round the corner, you hear the water, and see a clearing in the trees up ahead. A beautiful look out point awaits.

You are growing tired from your journey. Your body feels pleasantly tired and heavy.

Imagine yourself walking toward the clearing and the stream. Stepping stones make an easy path across the stream and toward the edge of the mountain. Step on each large flat stone to easily cross the small, shallow stream.

Up ahead is a large, smooth rock... like a chair waiting for you to rest. The rock is placed perfectly, high up on this beautiful vantage point.

Sit or lie down on the rock if you wish. It is very comfortable. You feel very comfortable and at ease. The sun shines down on you.

Looking around, you see mountains in the distance. Faint and blue.

You can look down from your vantage point into a valley with trees and a brilliant blue lake. Across from you is another mountain.

The clearing around you is made up of rocks, soil, pine needles, moss, and grass. The grass and mountain wildflowers around you blow gently in the breeze. A deer quietly emerges from the edge of the forest to graze in the clearing. As the deer raises its head to look at you, you can see its nostrils moving to catch your scent. The deer cautiously walks to the stream to drink before disappearing back into the forest.

Squirrels dart in and out of sight as they romp through the trees, and race across the clearing.

Feel the sun warming your body as you relax on the rock. Enjoy the majestic landscape around you and feel your body relaxing even more.

Your body becomes very warm, and very heavy.

Continue to breathe the clean, fresh air.

You feel so relaxed.

Calm.

At peace.

In unity with nature around you.

Enjoy the sights....sounds....and smells of the forest around you.

Feel the sun, warm on your skin.

Feel the gentle breeze blow across your cheek.

Listen to the birds singing.

Hear the stream flowing. The leaves rustling in the breeze. Squirrels chattering.

See the flowers, trees, valley, and mountains around you.

Lay back on the comfortable rock, and you can look up to see the blue sky. Small white clouds float gently across the sky. Watch them drift slowly by. Shapes ever changing.

Enjoy this peaceful place.

(pause...)

When you are ready to leave this peaceful place, slowly begin to reawaken your body.

Know that you can return to this forest visualization in your imagination whenever you like.

As you reawaken, keep with you the feeling of calm, peace, and relaxation.

Wiggle your fingers and toes to wake up your muscles.

Shrug your shoulders. Stretch if you want to.

When you are ready, open your eyes and return to full wakefulness, feeling alert and refreshed.

Mindfulness Awareness of Breathing: Instructions for Sitting Meditation

First sit in meditation posture, with your back upright. Do not lean against anything. If you are in a chair, feet should be flat on the floor. You can also sit cross-legged with your rear-end on a pillow to better enable yourself to sit up straight. If cross legged, make sure your knees are well-supported. Hands can be relaxed in the lap, resting on the legs, or in meditation hand posture.

Your back should be straight but not rigid: imagine a string pulling from the top of the head, connected through the middle of your skull, down through your spine in a straight line. Your body, especially your shoulders, are relaxed and natural. To help your shoulders relax, you can tense-and-release them a few times by holding a “shrug” for a few seconds then letting your shoulders go.

Breathe naturally without trying to control the process: just observe your natural breathing. Silently in your mind, count “one” on inhalation, and “one” on exhalation. Then “two” on the next inhalation and “two” on the next exhalation. Do this up to “ten”, and then start all over again, counting in the same way from one to ten.

While you are observing your in and out breaths, you may suddenly find that your mind has wandered off and is thinking about something- perhaps a memory from the past, or some thought of what might be in the future, or just plain day-dreaming. Once you realize that your mind has lost its focus and awareness of your in and out breaths, just simply go back to observing (counting) your breaths. Start counting at 1 again. It’s natural for the mind to wander off, so simply let go of (rather than pursue) the things you are thinking about. Each time you become aware that you’ve lost track of counting breaths, start over at 1, whenever you need to. You are not trying to reach a certain number.

In the beginning, sit for at least 2 minutes- just observing your breath. As time goes on you may add 5 or 10 minutes to your meditation sessions, until, ideally, you can sit for 20 to 30 min. Even a few minutes a day of sitting meditation has been found to bring benefits.

When you begin to sit in meditation, you will find that there is quite a lot of thoughts in your mind. You can simply let go, over and over, without holding on to them. As thoughts arise in your mind while you sit, you merely observe them, and return to your mindful awareness of counting your breath. Each thought will naturally move on when we don’t elaborate, cling to or reject it.

As you gain more experience and skill in your mindful awareness of breathing, you can simply observe your breathing without counting. According to Buddhist tradition, the ideal time for meditation is when you first wake up in the morning. The next best time is in the evening before you retire to sleep. If time permits, it is ideal to sit twice a day during each of these two times. However, if neither of these times is practical for you, then sit once or twice a day according to your schedule. However, try to avoid sitting right after you eat, as a full stomach is usually not comfortable or conducive to meditation.

Patience and perseverance are important for cultivating a meditation practice. The transformative qualities that emerge over time from meditation happen very naturally, without you even being aware of it. You may find you worry less, concentrate better, or no longer get upset so easily. However, it’s best to practice without a specific goal in mind, and let the practice reveal its gifts to you. Changes will take place quite naturally, without you realize or striving for them.

Adapted from Dharma Realm Buddhist Young Adults <http://ww.drby.net/index.php/Practice/mindfulness-awareness-of-breathing-instructions.html>

Letting Go Journal Exercise

What in my life (thoughts, emotions, experiences) has been difficult to let go of?

If I could let go of one thing in life that I struggle with, what would it be?

What would be different for me if I could let go of that one thing?

What are some ways I have tried to hold onto or recreate the positive and deny the unpleasant? How does this impact my anxiety and stress level?