

# Relaxation Techniques

Purpose of Relaxation Techniques. Relaxation is not just a passive activity, but an active, conscious release of tension. Doing physical relaxation techniques which release the voluntary muscles helps to reduce physical tension, reducing pain. It also can lead to a feeling of emotional well-being and security; this in turn reduces anxiety, which reduces our sensitivity to pain.

When to Use Relaxation Techniques. Anytime you're feeling stressed. Practicing these during pregnancy will benefit your pregnancy, and help them to be familiar tools you can use in labor and birth, and in your early days of parenting.

Tension Hold and Release. Beginning at your toes, and moving up to your head, flex each of your muscles in turn, making it as tight as possible, then relax it completely. This allows you to feel and recognize tension, and feel the relief of releasing tension. Begin with inhaling, then hold breath while tightening muscle, then relax while breathing out.

Passive Relaxation. Focus attention on your toes and feet. Just let go. Think how warm and relaxed they are. Focus on ankles and calves, think how loose and comfortable they are, and so on, up to your head, relaxing and releasing tension. Do deep, abdominal breathing.

Touch Relaxation. A partner exercise. Look for where someone is holding tension (e.g. jaw, eyes, hands, or shoulders) and touch them there to encourage relaxation: you might just rest your hand there, or stroke lightly, or do a firm massage.

Sixty Second Break: Close your eyes and take a deep breath. Imagine yourself somewhere soothing: on a sunny beach, in the woods, soaking in the shower. Think about how relaxed and warm your body would feel there, and let the tension flow out of you.

Visualizing a Safe Place: Close your eyes, take a deep breath. Imagine yourself somewhere that you feel safe and relaxed. It may be somewhere you've been many times, it may be someplace that exists only in your mind. Spend a few minutes there: think about what you can see, what colors surround you. Imagine the smells and tastes of the place. Think about how the air feels: warm or cool, still or a gentle breeze. Think about the sounds you might hear there. Try to create as vivid and multi-sensory picture of this place as you can.

Breathing in Energy: As you do slow deep breathing, add this visualization to it. Every time you breathe in, imagine breathing in anything that you need: strength, energy, confidence, faith, joy, etc. As you breathe out, let everything you don't need flow out of you: stress, fear, worries, muscle tension, etc.

Sigh. Want to feel more relaxed in just ten seconds? Take in a big deep breath, and let it out in one big, loud audible sigh or just blow out in a hard exhale.

## Practicing Relaxation Techniques

When practicing these techniques the first few times, make your environment as conducive as possible: dim lights, soft music, no interruptions. As you become more familiar with the techniques, and better able to reach a relaxed state, try using them in different positions, doing them while actively doing other activities (driving, cooking, talking on the phone) and when feeling stressed. These techniques are helpful not only during pregnancy and labor, but in all of life.

# A Breathing Technique For Labor and for Life: Relaxed Abdominal Breathing

## How To Breathe Deeply:

- Breathe in through your nose and out through your nose for the most relaxed, meditative breathing. In more active situations, breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. (If your nose is congested, as is common during pregnancy because of the effects of estrogen, then you may find it more comfortable to breathe in through your mouth all the time.)
- When you inhale, allow your belly to expand first, then your chest. (During quiet, resting times, most of the movement is in the abdomen. During more active periods, the abdomen will expand first, then the chest will also visibly expand and contract.)
- When you exhale, the chest relaxes first, then the belly.
- It may help to envision the breath spiraling inward, as the abdomen expands, then spiraling outward.
- Practice breathing at a rate of 5 – 7 breaths per minute for optimal health and relaxation. (Take 5 – 6 seconds to inhale, and the same amount of time to exhale.)
- Breathing this way increases the capacity of the lungs, allowing for more oxygen flow to you and to baby. Deep breathing can reduce anxiety, blood pressure, reduce headaches and other pain, and help you feel more relaxed.

## Other Ways to Reduce Tension and Stress

Dance! Put on your favorite music and dance! Move, shake, let the music guide you. Relax your body and your mind and groove to the sound.

Laugh! Remember a time when you laughed so hard you fell out of your chair? Laughter relaxes our muscles and our minds, so seek out things that make you laugh: comedy routines, funny movies, video tapes of other people's kids in their school plays. Get silly with friends or your partner.

Do Art. Do something artistic: paint, draw, decorate a cake, draw a smiley face on your mirror with toothpaste, etc.

Journal: Find a time to write about your thoughts and experiences. All the joys and all the challenges of this transformative time.

Worry List: If you're feeling worried, write down all your anxieties and pressures, then burn the list, or tear it up into little pieces, or do whatever will help you to release some of that stress.

Get moving: Stand up and stretch. Wiggle your shoulders and neck to release the tension. Go for a walk.