

Methods of Relaxation at our Various Levels of Being

Based on the work of John Harvey, Ph.D. and the Tradition of the Himalayan Masters

Chronic tension occurs when, natural physical responses to events that create tension, do not return to a neutral steady state, but remain. Chronic tension can occur at all the levels of our being: physical, nervous or autonomic, energetic, mental, emotional, and even spiritual. Chronic tension has many negative effects such as:

- Energy depletion
- Increased chance of getting sick
- Physical discomfort such as back pain, tension headache
- Emotional imbalance such as anxiety and depression
- Speeds the aging process as vital reserves are utilized
- Mental skills are compromised, with narrow focus, less problem solving possible
- Creativity is inhibited
- Negative affect on relationships

Relaxation is a Unique Kind of Learned Skill

Relaxation and distraction are two different things. Relaxation can be targeted to the various levels of our being and so depending on what the source of pattern of tension may be, or the cause or causes of stress, practices can be tailored for each individual. Each person will have their own needs and so the practices can be chosen and modified to fit the individual. Relaxation is a conscious self-directed skill however scripts and recording can be useful when learning. Its effects are cumulative and systematic, but can be felt in the first practice session. And relaxation practice involves passive volition. The intention is held passively in that it is something we must learn to *allow* to happen, versus making it happen. This can be quite a new type of experience for some.

Relaxation is a Complex Response with Distinct Dimensions

In this diagram, the koshas are seen to overlap at the autonomic nervous system between the body and pranic sheath, and at the emotions between the pranic sheath and the mind. We can create relaxation practices for individuals at all of these koshic levels and at the bisecting ones as well.

In relation to the koshic model, we can identify 6 levels of relaxation: muscular, autonomic (n.s.), energetic, emotional, mental, spiritual.

TENSION AT SIX LEVELS

Muscular Level

Patterns of Tension Can Result from:

- Constant repetitive use of certain muscles (sitting at desk)
- Overuse of muscles – jarring stressful life!
- Strong negative emotions that are kept on alert though socialized behavior can be a forced smile, a veneer of calm
- Long term from earlier trauma
- Cycle of behavior related to trauma: body language keeps person isolated
Example of Angry/aggressive interchanges, or defensive body stance, from fearful person... creates conflict and fear in others...etc.

Effects of Muscular Tension: Muscle spasms, toxins, less mobility & ease, movement range diminishes, loss of sensory awareness, headaches, neck aches, tight jaw, backaches, bruxism, tight shoulders, muscular tension, bad posture, nervous tics, leg cramps, tremors, etc.

Tension at this level is sustained contraction of skeletal muscles. The principle then is to direct muscles to loosen, lengthen, let go.

Autonomic Level

Patterns of Tension Can Result from: General sympathetic activation, or dorsal vagal. The pace of modern life with its constant possibility of perception of threat, real or imagined. Also, modern life's complexity of discerning a threat; this is not simple in our society. Appraisal of events can activate unnecessary autonomic nervous activation, and triggers based on past experiences. Common activation concerning deadlines, relationships, entertainment choices, etc... People in our society often use legal and illegal drugs, alcohol, antacids, Internet Gaming, excessive shopping, to attempt to release this tension. Often people find themselves stuck in a response: fight, flight, freeze, or possum response. It is far too easy with the marketing and convenience possible in our society to become stuck somewhere in the process of seeking relief with a habit of use that is not effective in the long run.

Effects of Autonomic Nervous System Tension: Indigestion, shallow or rapid breathing, irritable bowel, migraines, chronic constipation, sweaty hands, chronic diarrhea, cold hands, high blood pressure, excessive sweating, heart palpitations, etc.

The Nervous System controls inner organs and regulates heart rate, blood pressure, stomach activity and breathing rate. At this more complex level, the interplay of the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems (and sense of safety with regard to the ventral vagal and dorsal vagal aspects of parasympathetic activity) come into focus. Generally speaking, when we experience autonomic tension inside our body the sympathetic branch activation brings on symptoms such as heart palpitations, shortness of breath, sweating, cold extremities. An imbalance of too much parasympathetic activity can manifest as low energy, sighing, sluggish digestion. Relaxation at this level is accomplished through dynamic balance between activation and inhibition so that one feels peaceful, steady and calm.

Energetic Level

Patterns of Tension Can Result From: Any imbalance at any other level, as this level is the link between the mind and body.

Effects of Energetic Tension: hypersensitivity at all levels, tremors, nervous system irregularities, exhaustion, inability to focus, extreme ranges of emotion, seizures, debility in one or more aspects of being and not others, etc.

The pranic sheath, or energy body, interfaces with the autonomic and emotional levels and can be worked with by doing practices as both of these levels. Yoga has myriad pranayama or breathing practices that work directly with this level. Nadi Shodhanan and Bhuta Shuddhi are two examples.

Emotional Level

Patterns of Tension Can Result From: Any of the basic emotions of fear, disgust, shame, surprise, happiness, sadness, peacefulness, and love. They each have ranges, and can be experienced in combination, for instance, depression can be a combination of sadness, fear and anger. The word, emotion is from the Latin, *exmovere*, “to move away”. A definition of emotion is: a state of feeling combined with a strong physical response that prepares the body for immediate, vigorous action. Emotions have inherent survival and protective value. When in danger, fear gets us away from it. Anger allows us to be ready to fight, it may also at times, inspire us to work diligently for change for example in circumstances of seeking social justice.

The Four Fountains or four primitive urges can also be a source of emotional tension when we are not taking care of them adequately. When we don’t manage food, sex, sleep, and self-preservation, the emotions lose the stability of our body’s steady state of peaceful continuance, as nature takes over in search of a remedy it these innate urgings.

Effects of Emotional Tension: Hostility, anxiety, irritability, temper outbursts, anger, fears, sadness, depression, crying spells. Frustration, discouragement, phobias, hopelessness.

Tension can have a dramatic effect on our emotions. Negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, worry, sadness, hopelessness, and anger can at times dominate a person’s outlook. Chronic negative emotions can lead to states of depression and helplessness. These can be at times, considered the cause of many health problems. Strong feelings of anger and fear are natural and have protective value but when chronically activated overtime become harmful.

Emotional relaxation means working to let go of chronic negative feelings. When we loosen the grip of negative or not useful emotional habits of response, emotions such as contentment, happiness, joy can emerge. The Yoga Sutras teach us to practice pratipaksha bhavanam (*vitarka baadhane pratipaksha bhavanam – Y.S. 2:33*), and cultivate the opposite.

Mental Level

Patterns of Tension Can Result From: The minds quicksilver activity! Through distraction, intoxication, stimulation, the underlying recurring thoughts and worries remain. Mental tension is seen in a scattered mind and in a preoccupied, stuck mind. These less focused states of mind can distort perception, affect memory, relationships, etc.

Effects of Mental Tension: Distraction, limited perception, poor concentration, racing thoughts, intruding thoughts, confusion, obsessive thinking, worry, forgetfulness, indecision, preoccupation, weak memory, etc.

The level refers to our patterns of thinking and the orientation or coloring of our perception. A tense mind is scattered, stuck in superficial thinking, and can be obsessive. When we are tense, our perception is restrictive, narrow and inflexible. Relaxation at the mental level involves focus and openness. Pleasant pastimes like hobbies (NCIS'S Gibbs working on his boat ☺), pleasant absorption, focused and open to possibilities. Walks in nature. Hiking.

Spiritual Level

Spiritual Tension Can Result From: A sense of disconnection, alienation, emptiness, isolation. A lack of meaning or purpose.

Effects of Spiritual Tension: Difficulty falling asleep, low energy, restless sleep, paper shuffling, difficulty waking up, disorganization, excessive sleep, decreased productivity, use of caffeine, procrastination, nervous eating, constant working, loss of appetite, weight loss or gain, eating more and more junk food, accident prone, increased conflict with others, fatigue, etc.

Subtle tension occurs on the spiritual level. We see it in our culture's lack of connection to the sacred, as well as in an individual's confusion of life's purpose, absence of self-knowledge, lack of faith and direction, or knowing who we are, how we fit in, what's it all for? This special kind of tension can be alleviated through vision of the sacred, self-knowledge and acceptance, cultivation of one's unique inner potentials, purpose, and connection to a higher power.

These are all interrelated and each affect each in turn.

RELAXATION PRACTICES AT THE SIX LEVELS

Muscular Relaxation

Muscle tension is brought on by activation of the sensory motor cortex that sends motor signals to activate muscles. It also receives sensory information from the muscles. With chronic muscular tension, there are too many signals going out from the brain to contract muscles, and too few registering about the amount of contraction. The combination of sustained contraction and limited awareness creates a cycle of ever increasing tensions.

Muscular relaxation is based on *conscious awareness* of the amount of tension in the muscles, coupled with the ability to directly release unneeded, excessive muscular activation. Paying attention and learning to feel inside the body, as well as consciously directing relaxation of muscle fibers are all skills that can be learned!

Muscular Relaxation Practices: Direct and Indirect

Set up: Do in quiet, warm, draft free, comfortable clothing, in Shavasana or Crocodile

Direct

- **Systematic Tension-Release or Tension-Relaxation**
- **Differential Relaxation – activate and release muscles on different sides of the body**
- **Guided Systematic Relaxation**
- **Rotation of Consciousness**

Indirect

Movement can release activity potential trapped in the muscles fibers. Movements like dancing and running to release are great to release this, especially when movements are similar to fighting and fleeing: aerobic dance, running, walking, swimming, spinning, biking, etc. Also weight lifting. Also stretching.

Autonomic Relaxation Practices: Direct and Indirect

Set-up: As above in lying or sitting position

Direct

- **Optimal Breathing also called Rhythmic Diaphragmatic Breathing**
- **Alternate Nostril Breathing**
- **2:1 Breathing**
- **Autogenic Relaxation through passive concentration and self-suggestion**
- **61 Points**

Indirect

- **Exercise**
- **Visualization** such as positive imagery. Example: “Favorite Place” and “Safe Haven” practices

Energetic Relaxation Practices: Direct and Indirect

Direct:

- **See Autonomic**
- **Bhuta Shuddhi**
- **Navel Radial Visualization Patterns**
- **Specific Breathing and Visualization Practices for Specific Nadis**

Indirect:

- **Tai Chi, Ba Gua, other energetic martial arts**
- **Dancing, aerobic exercise that focuses on vyana vayu**
- **Asana with whole body integration, navel radiation**

Emotional Relaxation Practices: Cognitive, Physical & Lifestyle

Emotional relaxation has to do with working to overcome habits of responsivity that are determined to be of little or no use.

Cognitive approaches to emotional relaxation or working directly with our thoughts.

- **Revise Self-talk**
- **Practice Mindfulness/Meditation in Action**
 - (1) **Labeling** – simple descriptors, like anger, sad, etc. notice relationships of thoughts and feelings
 - (2) **Observe feelings that are present for a period of time. Practice witnessing** – just notice feelings, don’t react, or intervene. Just notice and let go of them.
- **Dwelling on the opposite:** when disturbed, encourage the opposite.

Physical Approaches

- **Diaphragmatic breathing Practice**
- **Alternate Nostril Breathing**
- **Smile Breathing**
- **Exercise & Movement**

Lifestyle Approaches

- **Managing the Four Fountains:** food, sex, sleep, self-preservation
- **Talking & Listening:** practice awareness through nonviolent communication, I-statements, talking with therapist, ...

Mental Relaxation Practices: Sensory, Concentration, Meditation

- **Sensory Focusing:** practice noticing sensory information without judgement
- **Circle of Sound:** locate sounds on clock face with you at center. Describe each sound neutrally.
- **Concentration:** sit, relax, DB, notice breath and follow it saying, “cool air in, warm air out”.
- **Formal Meditation**

Spiritual Relaxation Practices

Spiritual connection research has found that people live longer, with less stress, and better coping skills, as so forth if they can find a meaningful connection to whatever it may be!

- **Worship**
- **Prayer**
- **Chanting**
- **Singing Uplifting Songs, Music**
- **Reading Scriptures**
- **Contemplation**
- **Meditation:** “so ham” mala japa, “Lord Jesus, have mercy on my soul” with Rosary
- **Seva**
- **Pilgrimage**
- **Possibility of living a principled life if not acknowledging god/higher power**

Spiritual practices give a sense of peace, feeling of connection, vision and purpose.

Autogenic Relaxation Example

Repeat each statement three times. Can have someone else read as in “your right arm is heavy.”

My right arm is heavy.
My left arm is heavy.
Both arms are heavy.
My right leg is heavy.
My left leg is heavy.
Both legs are heavy.
My right arm is warm.
My left arm is warm.
Both arms are warm.
My right leg is warm.
My left leg is warm.
Both legs are warm.
My arms and legs are heavy and warm.
My heartbeat is calm and regular.
It breathes me.
My solar Plexus is warm.
My forehead is cool.

Sample Prayers

With your feet I walk
I walk with your limbs
I carry forth your body
For me your mind thinks
Your voice speaks for me
Beauty is before me
And beauty is behind me
Above and below me hovers the beautiful
I am surrounded by it
I am immersed in it
In my youth I am aware of it
And in my old age I shall walk quietly
The beautiful trail.

- Navajo Prayer

Hear O Israel: The LORD is our GOD,
The LORD is One.

- Shema Yisrael

Lead me from the unreal to the Real.
Lead me from darkness to Light.
Lead me from death to Immortality.
Om, Peace, Peace, Peace.

- Upanishads

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred let me sow love
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
Where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console,
To be understood and to understand,
And to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive,
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
- St. Francis of Assisi

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;
Courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference.
Living one day at a time; enjoying one moment at a time;
Accepting hardships as the pathways to peace;
Taking this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it;
Trusting that you will make all things right if I surrender to your will;
That I may be reasonably happy in this life
And supremely happy with you forever in the next.
- Attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr

May there be peace in the higher regions; may there be peace in the firmament; may there be
peace on earth. May the waters flow peacefully; may the herbs and plants grow peacefully; may
all the divine powers bring unto us peace. The supreme Lord is peace. May we all be I peace,
peace, peace, and only peace; and may that peace come unto each of us.
- The Vedas

Now that evening has fallen,
To God, the Creator, I will turn in prayer,
Knowing that he will help me.
I know the Father will help me.
- Dinka, Sudan

Relaxation Practices in Categories: Review

Muscular

Systematic Tension – Relaxation

Differential Relaxation

Guided Relaxation also called Systematic Relaxation

Rotation of Consciousness

Autonomic

Optimal Breathing also called Diaphragmatic Breathing or Breath Awareness

Alternate Nostril Breathing also called *Nadi Shodhanam*

Two-to-one Breathing

Autogenic Relaxation

Sixty-One Points

Exercise

Visualization

Energetic

See Autonomic

Bhuta Shuddhi

Navel Radial Visualization Patterns

Specific Breathing and Visualization Practices for Specific Nadis

Tai Chi, Ba Gua, other energetic martial arts

Dancing, aerobic exercise that focuses on vyana vayu

Asana with whole body integration, navel radiation

Emotional

Revising Self-talk

Mindfulness also called Meditation in Action

Dwell on the Opposite also called *pratipaksha bhavanam*

Breath Awareness

Alternate Nostril Breathing

Smile Breathing

Exercise

Four Fountain Management also called Four Urges, or Four Primitive Urges

Talk and Listen

Mental

Circle of Sound Sensory Focus

Concentration

Meditation

Spiritual

Worship

Prayer

Chanting, Singing Hymns

Contemplation, Scriptural Study

Meditation

Seva

Pilgrimage