

Keys to Moving from Stress to Relaxation

Through these occasional web-columns I offer the preventative component of the Counseling Ministry. One of the most important aspects of prevention of distress, illness, and relational break-down is the **daily** practice of relaxation. This daily practice also offers great support in the processes of healing, growth, and warm relational connection. I have compiled some of my favorite strategies for you.

1) Deep breathing while imagining God's warm light of Love surrounding and filling you. When you notice that your mind wanders, gently bring your attention back to the sensations of that warm light. ***

2) Deep breathing while imagining being in your favorite peaceful place in the natural world. When you notice that your mind wanders, gently bring your attention back to the sensations of being in that peaceful place.***

3) Trinity breath prayer: Breathe in on 3 counts (silently praying "Father" or "Creator"), hold for 3 counts ("Son" or "Redeemer"), and breathe out on 3 counts ("Holy Spirit" or "Sustainer").

4) Progressive deep muscle relaxation: deep breathing while tightening and then relaxing muscle groups, starting with toes and moving up your body.***

******(For those with no experience in deep breathing, use the 2 hand method: one hand on upper chest, other hand at diaphragm (waistband-belly area). Notice which hand moves as you breathe. Gradually allow your breathing to deepen so your lower hand is moving more perceptibly than your top hand.)***

5) The 4-7-8 (or Relaxing Breath) Exercise from
<http://www.drweil.com/drw/u/ART00521/three-breathing-exercises.html>

"This exercise is utterly simple, takes almost no time, requires no equipment and can be done anywhere. Although you can do the exercise in any position, sit with your back straight while learning the exercise. Place the tip of your tongue against the ridge of tissue just behind your upper front teeth, and keep it there through the entire exercise. You will be exhaling through your mouth around your tongue; try pursing your lips slightly if this seems awkward.

- Exhale completely through your mouth, making a whoosh sound.
- Close your mouth and inhale quietly through your nose to a mental count of **four**.
- Hold your breath for a count of **seven**.
- Exhale completely through your mouth, making a whoosh sound to a count of **eight**.
- This is one breath. Now inhale again and repeat the cycle three more times for a total of four breaths.

Note that you always inhale quietly through your nose and exhale audibly through your mouth. The tip of your tongue stays in position the whole time. Exhalation takes twice as long as inhalation. The absolute time you spend on each phase is not important; the ratio

of 4:7:8 is important. If you have trouble holding your breath, speed the exercise up but keep to the ratio of 4:7:8 for the three phases. With practice you can slow it all down and get used to inhaling and exhaling more and more deeply.

This exercise is a natural tranquilizer for the nervous system. Unlike tranquilizing drugs, which are often effective when you first take them but then lose their power over time, this exercise is subtle when you first try it but gains in power with repetition and practice. Do it at least twice a day. You cannot do it too frequently. Do not do more than four breaths at one time for the first month of practice. Later, if you wish, you can extend it to eight breaths. If you feel a little lightheaded when you first breathe this way, do not be concerned; it will pass.

Once you develop this technique by practicing it every day, it will be a very useful tool that you will always have with you. Use it whenever anything upsetting happens - before you react. Use it whenever you are aware of internal tension. Use it to help you fall asleep. This exercise cannot be recommended too highly. Everyone can benefit from it."

6) Focusing Prayer (based on Inner Relationship Focusing).

This method requires some uninterrupted quiet time, and usually folks need to experience it several times in session, while the therapist guides the process, before they are able to use it on their own at home.

For one example, read my web-column called "Key for Living Your Resolutions" at http://www.stpaulstpete.com/counseling/key_for_living_jan08.html

7) Walking Meditation

This method is especially helpful at times when you can't find some uninterrupted quiet space for your relaxation practice since you can use it even in the midst of noise and others' activities. Even 5 minutes can help and this can be really good modeling for others in your household of how to shift from reactivity to calm! Some of your kids might even be willing to join you in the practice.

Simple version:

Walk very slowly, noticing each part of the foot as it moves through contact with the earth. Allow your breathing to slow and move with the walking pace. Possibly choose a prayer phrase or Scripture verse to pray as you walk, such as "Live in My Love" (Gospel of John 15:9).

If you find you need even more focus for your busy mind:

On first in-breath: lift heel of right foot. On out-breath: hold right foot on ball/toes. On second in-breath: bring right foot forward and hold in air. On out-breath: lower right foot. Repeat with left foot, same 4 motions. Keep eyes focused about 4 feet in front of you to help balance. You may choose a prayer phrase that is meaningful to you, such as "Live in My Love" (Gospel of John 15:9).

To reflect on other aspects of your lifestyle which may benefit from some steps toward more relaxation and less tension and stress, read my web-column "Key for Living Well with Multiple Stressors": http://www.stpaulstpete.com/counseling/key_for_living_oct08.html

May you receive God's grace and peace today!

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