

People under stress tend to tense their muscles as part of the stress syndrome. Several scientific studies have shown that by using simple relaxation techniques, people can counteract muscle tension and thus feel better. The secret is to use the techniques faithfully, which can be difficult in the middle of a busy schedule, unless you really make them part of your routine. Here are five ways to relax in 20 minutes or less. They require only a little practice and aren't seriously disruptive.

PROGRESS RELAXATION

Lie down in a quiet room, shut your eyes, and let your mind drift for a minute or two. Then think about the muscle groups in your body—face and neck, shoulders, arms, abdomen, legs, and feet. Tense a set of muscles in each group, working from head to toe. For example, wrinkle your forehead and hold tension for a moment. Then breathe deeply and exhale, relaxing the muscles as you do so. Learn what muscle tension feels like, and gradually try to tense your muscles only halfway. At first this exercise may take a full 20 minutes, but once you have learned it, even five minutes will be helpful. And you don't necessarily have to lie down.

SCANNING

At your desk, during your coffee break, or even while riding a bus or waiting for a red light to change, inhale and slowly "scan" your body, thinking about each muscle group, as above and searching out tense muscles. As you exhale, relax the muscles that are tense. It may help, as you scan, to recite silently some phrase with a calming effect—"serene and peaceful" or "I am calm."

COUNTDOWN

With eyes closed, count backwards from 10 or 20, saying each number silently as you exhale. You must concentrate and call your imagination into play. Imagine you are going down a stairway, or past the floors in a building as an elevator descent. Count down from your age, and imagine that you are traveling briefly into your past. When you have reached zero and want to resume your normal routine, inhale and count to three.

IMAGERY

Stop what you are doing and close your eyes. Imagine a beautiful scene, perhaps something you saw on your last vacation. Spend five minutes examining and enjoying every detail of the picture. If you are by a lake, listen to the water lapping. Count the trees and flowers. See, hear, and smell things.

THE TURTLE

This simple exercise, adapted from a yoga practice, is designed to relax the muscles of your neck and back. Sit up straight and let your chin fall to your chest as you exhale. Inhale and move your head back slowly as though trying to touch the back of your neck with your head. Pull your shoulders up as though trying to touch them with your ears. Then release. You can do this anytime, anywhere. It doesn't even look all that odd.

Herbert Benson's QUIETING REFLEX is a mini-relaxation exercise which requires only a few minutes to do. You should use this exercise periodically throughout your day to reduce your stress levels.

Below is a list of the elements of the fight/flight response. Across from each element is the corresponding QUIETING REFLEX component.

<u>Fight/Flight</u>	<u>Quieting Reflex</u>
Fear of Angry	Smile to Oneself
Clench Jaw	Relax or Drop Your Jaw
Catch or Hold Breath	Take a Minimum of Two Slow and Even Breaths
Worry or Concern	Say the Word "Relax" or "Calm" on Each Exhale
Blood Away from the Periphery and to the Muscles/Organs	Think About Warming and/or Sending Blood Out to Your Hands and Feet

All the components of the QUIETING REFLEX should be done simultaneously or in concert. The ease of coordinating these components improves with practice.