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Parenting

the

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The Relaxation Response

Parenting is stressful. To be the best parent for your child, learning stress management is essential.

According to Jonathan C. Smith in his book, Stress Management: A Comprehensive Handbook of Techniques and Strategies (2002), stress management begins with relaxation. Relaxation is the act of simply letting go and focusing. It is much more difficult than one might think. Life (and parenting) is effortful. We strive to achieve our daily goals. We plan schedules and shopping lists. To relax, we have

to let go and cease active goal directed planning. We have to focus on one simple thing--relaxation.

Everyone has experienced special moments of sustained passive simple focus. Seeing a beautiful sunset might create an instant of peace and beauty. Hearing a musical piece might take one to a place of calm. Such moments are part of life's treasures, but such moments come and go quickly. The secret of relaxation is to sustain the moment.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation is the most widely used professional approach to muscle relaxation in America.

Deep Muscle Relaxation (adapted from The Stress Connection)

The technique involves tensing specific muscle groups and then relaxing them. Tense for 5 - 10 seconds; let go for 20 - 30 seconds. For tensing, think the word, TENSE and then spell out T..E..N..S..E in your mind. For relaxing, think RELAX, RELAX, RELAX and then mentally spell out the word three times, R..E..L..A..X.., R..E..L..A..X.., R..E..L..A..X...

Take your time to get the full benefit. Assume a position for relaxation (eyes closed, lying on the floor, quiet, passive attitude). Go through the following for each muscle group twice.

Muscle	Tension Method
Forehead	Wrinkle your forehead. Try to make your eyebrows touch your hairline. Relax.
Eyes & Nose	Close your eyes as tightly as you can. Relax.
Lips, Cheeks & Jaw	Draw the corners of your mouth back and grimace. Relax. Feel the warmth and calmness in your face.
Hands	Extend your arms in front of you. Clench your fists tightly. Relax. Feel the warmth and calmness in your hands.
Forearms	Extend your arms out against an invisible wall and push forward with your hands. Relax.
Upper Arms	Bend your elbows. Tense your biceps. Relax. Feel the tension leave your arms.
Shoulders	Shrug your shoulders up to your ears. Relax.
Back	Arch your back off the floor for five seconds. Relax. Feel and anxiety and tension disappearing.
Stomach	Tighten your stomach muscles. Relax.
Hips & Buttocks	Tighten your hip and buttock muscles. Relax.
Thighs	Tighten your thigh muscles by pressing your legs together as tightly as you can. Relax.
Feet	Bend your ankles toward your body as far as you can. Relax.
Toes	Curl your toes under as tightly as you can. Relax.

Autogenic Training is a popular European approach to relaxation. It is based on the idea that thoughts can evoke bodily relaxation such as heaviness, warmth, and evenly beating heart, and slow breathing.

Warm Hands (adapted from Structured Exercises in Stress Management)

Begin by taking a deep breath. Inhale, filling your lungs with air all the way down to the belly. Now exhale slowly with a soft “whooshing” sound.

Take another deep breath . . . and imagine as you breathe out that all the tension is leaving your body.

Imagine your hands as warm – relaxed and warm . . . Say to yourself slowly four times . . . MY HANDS ARE WARM, RELAXED AND WARM . . . (pause 15 seconds)

Visualize your hands in warm sand, or in the sun, or in a warm bath . . . Stay with that image as you slowly say to yourself . . . MY HANDS ARE WARM, RELAXED AND WARM . . . (pause 15 seconds)

Remind yourself again . . . MY HANDS ARE WARM, RELAXED AND WARM . . . (pause)

As you continue to visualize your hands becoming warmer and more relaxed . . . perhaps you can even

begin to allow the blood to flow down your arms . . . and into your hands . . . leaving them feeling warmer and warmer . . . and more and more relaxed . . .

Let that feeling of warmth and relaxation spread down your arms and into your hands as you say to yourself . . . MY HANDS ARE WARM, RELAXED AND WARM . . . (pause)

Allow that pleasant feeling of warmth to spread throughout your body as you tell yourself . . . I AM CALM AND RELAXED . . . (pause) Continue to enjoy this feeling of warmth and relaxation as you prepare to turn your attention from the inner you to the outer world . . . Turn your attention from the inner to the outer world.

Before you open your eyes, mentally prepare for your return by saying several times to yourself . . . WHEN I OPEN MY EYES I WILL FEEL RELAXED, FRESH AND ALERT (pause)

When you are ready . . . open your eyes.

Best indicators of overall relaxation are being at ease/peace, feeling joy and happiness, and being energized. An absence of these states is a good overall indicator of expressed need for relaxation training.

Six approaches to relaxation, according to Jonathan Smith, used by health professionals and that have the most scientific support are:

- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Autogenic training
- Breathing
- Yoga stretching
- Sense imagery
- Meditation

Muscle relaxation and autogenic training are good for physical relaxation. Breathing exercises and yoga stretching energize. Sense imagery, a visualization technique, promotes feelings of peace and joy. Experiment to find relaxation exercises that evoke a relaxation response for you.

Remember—taking care of yourself is important. Managing your stress lets you be a better parent.



Sources:

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