RELAXATION STRATEGIES

For many students at Midwestern University, experiencing stress and/or anxiety is a normal and expected response to the intense academic programs. This handout is a guideline to understand the stress/anxiety response and provide two strategies, diaphragmatic breathing and systemic relaxation, for conscious relaxation during times of stress/anxiety.

The human body is designed to protect us from physical danger by activating the sympathetic nervous system for survival, the fight-or-flight response. In addition, this survival response can be triggered by psychological danger, a perception that something crucial to us is being threatened. Examples of psychological dangers can include worrying about school, job, or relationships, or failing an exam. Our bodies do not differentiate between physical or psychological dangers and can exhibit physical symptoms such as: elevated heart rate and/or blood pressure, shallow breathing, indigestion, and increased perspiration. When stress/anxiety persist, the sympathetic nervous system is constantly being activated and other symptoms may emerge such as muscle fatigue, loss of sleep, recurring headaches, digestive upset, and/ or increased irritability.

The human body is also equipped with the ability to regain equilibrium through the parasympathetic nervous system, the rest and digest response. When the body’s equilibrium is re-established, heart rate and blood pressure lower, respiration also lowers and deepens, blood flow is reallocated to the body’s core, allowing for improved digestion and a sense of well-being. Often it may seem impossible or extremely difficult to engage the parasympathetic nervous system for relaxation, but through deep, diaphragmatic breathing and systemic relaxation the rest and digest response can consciously be engaged.

Diaphragmatic Breathing
Every human being was born breathing diaphragmatically, deep and fully. It is the most efficient, natural, and healthy way to breathe. However, in living in a society filled with pressure, stress, and messages to do more in shorter periods of time, we eventually learn to chest breathe.

The process of relearning to breathe diaphragmatically takes time and practice. However once learned, feeling relaxed, calm, refocused, and experiencing a sense of well-being is just a few breaths away.

Follow the instructions below, 1-2 times a day anywhere from 1 to 15 minutes. In two weeks, the principles of diaphragmatic breathing will become internalized, making it easier to call upon this strategy to feel relaxed when pressure and stress intensify. This practice can also be done in a seated position; however, initially it may easier to breathe deeply in a prone position.
1. Lie on your back on a firm surface with your eyes closed.
2. Place one hand on your abdomen, the other on your chest.
3. Inhale and exhale through your nose.
4. As you inhale, keep your chest still and allow the breath to enter your diaphragm, gently raising your abdomen.
5. Keep breathing deeply; your abdomen will rise and fall and your chest will remain still.
6. Keep the breath smooth; no jerking or hitching during the inhalation or exhalation.
7. Keep the breath even; the inhalation and exhalation the same length. It may help to count as you breathe. (This also helps to remain focused).
8. Keep the breath silent, no sound either on the inhalation or exhalation.
9. Have no pauses in the breath; the transition from inhalation to exhalation should be smooth. (Think of a wheel turning round).
10. Lay quietly, breathing smoothly and evenly. Each inhalation is a calming breath, the exhalation is cleansing. Stay here as long as you want.
11. Before coming to a seated position, roll over on your left side, bringing your knees to your chest. Keep your eyes closed, take a few breaths before coming to a seated position.
12. Once seated, rub your hands together to generate some warmth, place your hands over your eyes, and gently open your eyes into your hands.
13. Remove your hands, take a few breaths, and acclimate to the lights before standing up. Take your time.

Systemic Relaxation

Using physical activities to release stress and tension can be useful in managing stress by reducing the tension held in body’s muscles. Systemic relaxation is another strategy that is a precise, orderly technique for releasing tension from head to toe. As you practice systemic relaxation, try to keep let go of worries, thoughts, plans, lists, memories, conversations, etc. and focus on the present by concentrating and focusing your awareness calmly and quietly from one part of the body to the next.

Follow the instructions below, practicing 1-2 times a day 3-4 times a week to gain mastery of relaxing stress, tension, and pressures. To prevent stress and tension from building up, practice systemic relaxation 1-2 time every day.

1. Lie on your back on a firm surface with your eyes closed.
2. Pay attention to your breathing; begin to breathe diaphragmatically.
3. Take several deep, smooth, even breathes.
4. Feel the surface beneath you, supporting your body.
5. Begin to settle your body onto the surface.
6. Starting from the top of your head, be aware of your scalp. As you exhale, consciously relax your scalp. Repeat.

7. On an inhalation, pull all your facial muscles into the center of your face, close your eyes tightly, pucker your lips, and furrow your brow. Hold for a breath, then on an exhalation, release the muscles.

8. Take a breath; be aware of the muscles in your face. Do they feel any differently? Be aware of any changes.

9. Move down to your shoulders; on an inhalation, tighten the muscles in your neck and shoulders, and bring your shoulders up to your ears. Hold for a breath, then release on the next exhalation.

10. Take a breath and pay attention to any changes in your neck and shoulders.

11. Starting with your left arm, on an inhalation, tighten the muscles in your shoulder, upper arm, lower arm, make a fist, and stretch your arm away from your body and off the surface 1-2 inches, as if someone is pulling your arm. Hold for a breath, and then release all the muscles in your arm.

12. Take a breath, wiggle your fingers, and circle your left wrist in both directions.

13. Place your left arm on the floor, take a breath and be aware of any differences between your left and right arm.

14. On the next inhalation, repeat with your right arm (steps 11, 12, and 13).

15. Keeping your shoulders on the surface you’re laying on, on an inhalation, squeeze the shoulder blades together (your back will arch slightly and your chest will be open). Hold for a breath, release the shoulder blades.

16. Take a breath and be aware of any differences in your chest and upper back.

17. On the next inhalation, tighten your abdominal muscles, glutes, and muscles in the lower back, pulling all the muscles inward. Hold for a breath, then on an exhalation, release.

18. Take a breath and be aware of any changes in the abdominal area.

19. Starting with your left leg, tighten the muscles in upper thigh, knee, calf, ankle, point your toes, lift your leg 1-2 inches off the surface, pulling away from you (out of the hip joint). Hold for a breath, then release all the muscles in your left leg.

20. Take a breath, wiggle your toes, and circle your foot at the ankle in both directions.

21. Place your left leg on the floor, take a breath and be aware of any differences between your left and right leg.

22. On the next inhalation, repeat with your right leg (steps 19, 20, 21).

23. Take a few more breaths, paying attention to any areas in your body that remain tight or stiff. Bring your breath to these areas and on an exhalation, release the muscles, tension, and stress.
24. Lay quietly, breathing smoothly and evenly. Each inhalation is a calming breath, the exhalation is cleansing. Take 5-10 breaths (or more).

25. Roll over on your left side, bringing your knees to your chest. Take a few breaths before coming to a seated position with your eyes closed.

26. Once seated, rub your hands together to generate some warmth, place your hands over your eyes, and gently open your eyes into your hands.

27. Remove your hands, take a few breaths and acclimate to the lights before standing up. Take your time.