

We all feel pulled in a thousand different directions some days, but some of us feel that way *every* day. Some days we find ourselves dividing our attention to accommodate several people at once. Is it no wonder some of us find it difficult to relax? Successful relaxation strategies vary for each person and at different points in time. It is easy to let them slide when our lives are full steam ahead every day of the year!

We know that some stress is good: it keeps us motivated, challenged and interested in what we are doing. But how much is enough and how much is too much? What can you do to find that calm state of mind so that you can continue to be healthy, focused and productive in your daily life? More research is revealed every year discussing stress’, impact on our day-to-day function and its relationship to our digestive system, our immune system, our reproductive systems, our thyroid, our brain, our muscles and so on. As we become more aware of our physical, mental and emotional health needs, we need to ask, “*What can we do about it?*”

Relaxation is only one part of a larger stress management strategy but can have significant health benefits. People use relaxation techniques for many reasons, including anger management, anxiety attacks, heart health, depression, headaches, high blood pressure, insomnia, or pain management. They can help you return to your own equilibrium and release physical, emotional, or mental stress to attain a state of calm.

In honour of National Occupational Therapy Month this October, make the time to relax and find your best strategy. Here are some techniques you may find helpful. Remember, some may speak to you more than others based on your values, interests, health, learning methods and so on. Keep an open mind, practice a few that stick out to you and you will soon see the benefits of a calmer, more relaxed version of yourself!

**Meditation:** According to research from the Mayo Clinic, meditation is one of the first relaxation techniques to show a measurable effect on stress reduction.

According to [www.morethanmeditation.ca](http://www.morethanmeditation.ca), “*The essence of meditation is to focus your attention, so that “mental clutter” — everyday thoughts of work, chores or worries — fall away. This can bring a sense of calmness, peacefulness and balance, as well as new insights and clarity. In time, you may find that these results linger with you long after the meditation session has ended. While the specifics may vary, most meditation sessions follow these basic steps:*

- *For sitting meditation, **find a comfortable position** cross-legged on the floor (you may also sit in a chair with your feet flat on the floor) and back straight but relaxed.*
- ***Rest your hands in your lap**, nesting palms up.*
- ***Partially close your eyes and relax your gaze** by staring into the middle distance.*
- ***Choose a focal point** to help direct your attention. This could be your breathing, a word that you repeat, physical sensations, a photograph of a beautiful setting or an image that you picture in your mind, such as light or water.*
- *Begin by simply **being aware of yourself breathing**, and gradually relax your body.*
- ***Allow your mind to relax.** Don’t try to empty your mind or push thoughts away. Just watch them come and go, and gently return your wandering attention to the focus of your meditation session.”*

According to Herbert Benson, MD, author of *The Relaxation Response*, relaxation through meditation can be achieved through any repetitive action, such as walking, swimming, painting or knitting, as long as it keeps you calm and focused on the present moment. He recommends trying it for 5-10 minutes per day and you will notice a change in your stress levels.

**Visualization:** If your mind is racing too much to meditate, you may find it easier to close your eyes and picture yourself relaxed. What this picture looks like in your mind’s eye will be different for every person. You may see yourself lying in the sun with your cat curled on your lap reading a book or having a nap. Perhaps you’re in some exotic locale sipping a glass of wine watching the sunset, or maybe it’s as simple as getting a hug from one of your favourite people. Wherever this visualization takes you, be present. What do you see? What sounds and smells are there? Can you feel a breeze or the sand between your toes? Can you taste that sweet crisp lemonade as you take your first sip? Immerse yourself in the vision, breathe and escape the stress of your current real-life situation. The more realistic your vision, the more you will emerge in a more relaxed state.

**Progressive muscle relaxation:** The basic idea is to systematically train tensing and relaxing groups of muscles. Sit upright with your eyes closed and both feet flat on the ground. Tighten each group of muscles and hold the tension for about 5 seconds, then relax for about 30 seconds. While focusing your mind on the muscles just exercised you will sense the progressive relaxation after releasing the muscles. Let it happen that way and enjoy it. Repeat each exercise once, starting with one hand, arm and shoulder, moving to the other side and systematically tensing and releasing the muscles in your neck, face, jaw, hips, legs and feet. At the end, keep your eyes closed for a short while and enjoy the rest a little longer. Breathing in deeply, move your fingers and toes playfully, stretch yourself and open your eyes. The entire process will take approximately 20 minutes.



Deep breathing can be done on its own or as part of another relaxation technique. It is usually inherent in meditation, visualization and progressive muscle relaxation. When we are stressed, our bodies will naturally take more shallow breaths, causing increased muscle and respiratory tension. You want to focus on your breath: feel the air moving into your lungs in three parts – your chest, ribs and finally your belly. Your exhale is the opposite and should last as long as your inhale. For example, inhale for a count of eight, pause at the end of the inhale, and slowly release the air from your lungs for another eight counts. Repeat this deep breathing until you feel your tension subside.

**Mindfulness:** Approach life like a child, focusing on the here and now, one thing at a time, with no multi-tasking. To get started, focus on the five senses: what do you see, hear, smell, feel and taste at the present moment. Pass no judgment and focus on

your immediate surroundings.

Reduce or eliminate stimulants such as caffeine: Although you may get a jolt of energy from the caffeine, it raises the level of the stress hormone cortisol in your system. If it’s a hot drink you crave, try a decaf or herbal tea, or if it’s something icy and fizzy, water or juice may be just as satisfying.


**Massage:** Most of us hold stress in tense muscles. Whether it’s a self-massage, a treat from your spouse or a professional massage session, having your tense muscles rubbed into submission can make a world of difference in your mental and physical state of relaxation.

**Check your attitude:** Think positive thoughts and when negativity abounds, take the time to evaluate these thoughts and flip them around. Instead of saying: “it’s freezing outside, this weather is terrible”, consider “It’s such a relief to enter such a warm and cozy home in this weather.” When your thoughts are spiraling downward, your stress level will soar and the vicious cycle away from relaxation will endure.

**Exercise such as yoga, gardening, walking or t’ai chi:** Finding an activity you enjoy and being active can boost your endorphins and make you feel relaxed. The activity must be something you enjoy and that suits your lifestyle and physical abilities. Don’t overdo it, but simultaneous energy expenditure and distraction can be a great way to relax, set your worries aside and re-energize.

If all else fails, and these techniques aren’t what you are looking for. THERE’S AN APP FOR THAT! Apps like “Ambiance” or “Asleep” will allow you to download various calming sounds such as music or nature sounds to help you relax. “Bubbles” is a very basic game where you pop bubbles and encourage some zone-out time. “Izen Garden” is Japanese gardens you can create to help you meditate. There are also many apps that will guide you through progressive muscle relaxation, visualization exercises and deep breathing.

For more information, visit: [www.mayoclinic.com](http://www.mayoclinic.com); [www.webmd.com](http://www.webmd.com); [www.morethanmeditation.ca](http://www.morethanmeditation.ca); [www.goodrelaxation.com](http://www.goodrelaxation.com), or contact the NSTU Early Intervention Program for Teachers at [eip@nstu.ca](mailto:eip@nstu.ca), 477-5621 or toll free at 1-800-565-6788.



The Early Intervention Program (EIP) invites NSTU members to sign up for our Wellness email list at [Be\\_Well@nstu.ca](mailto:Be_Well@nstu.ca).

Please contact Erin at [ekeefe@staff.nstu.ca](mailto:ekeefe@staff.nstu.ca) to provide her with your NSTU email address. The [Be\\_Well@nstu.ca](mailto:Be_Well@nstu.ca) list will provide information about the EIP and other wellness topics.

