

Chapter 1

Discovering Relaxation

In This Chapter

- ▶ Uncovering the basics of relaxation
 - ▶ Seeing how relaxation benefits all aspects of your life
 - ▶ Making relaxation part of your daily routine
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The phrase ‘just relax’ sounds so simple. To relax you really just need to stop ‘doing’. And yet ‘stopping doing’ is easier said than done. Your life has probably got more demanding over time. In those few moments that you have for yourself, relaxation may seem elusive. You may ask yourself questions like ‘How do I relax?’, ‘What’s the best way to relax?’ or ‘Why am I so stressed all the time?’

In this chapter, I help you begin your journey from anxiety and worry to discovering ways to find greater ease and peace in your life.

Understanding Relaxation

Relaxation is a state of mental calm and focus, free from unnecessary bodily tension. Relaxation is associated with a feeling of peace and tranquillity. You can achieve greater relaxation in two main ways:

- ✓ Using *relaxation techniques*, such as meditation, progressive relaxation or guided imagery.
- ✓ Doing *relaxation activities*, such as taking a bath, going for a walk, improving your time management skills or playing a sport.

Relaxation techniques reduce your stress and put you into a state of body and mind where you’re deeply relaxed. This effect is called the *relaxation response* and is the opposite of feeling stressed. When your relaxation response is turned on, positive changes take place in your body and mind. You’re better able to digest food and fight disease. You feel calm and at peace.

Relaxation activities help to reduce stress rather than put you into a state of relaxation. Most relaxation activities don't engage your relaxation response unless they encourage a calm focus of your attention, such as stroking a cat or doing a hobby that requires gentle attention.

You may not be good at relaxing at the moment, but you can definitely get better at relaxation. Relaxation is a skill and improves with practice. Learning relaxation techniques requires some time and effort, and you get the hang of them through trial and error, just like learning anything new.



Most people say activities like watching TV, having a cup of tea and chatting to a friend are relaxing. These activities do reduce stress and are certainly valuable, but they don't turn on your relaxation response so they're stress-reducing but not deeply relaxing.

The state of relaxation isn't sleeping. If you use a relaxation technique and you fall asleep, that's fine but after you fall asleep, you don't get any better at relaxing – you're just asleep. In true relaxation you feel calm and free of tension, but quite focused too.

Living a relaxed lifestyle requires relaxing activities, regular practice of relaxation techniques and a relaxed attitude, as I show in Figure 1-1.

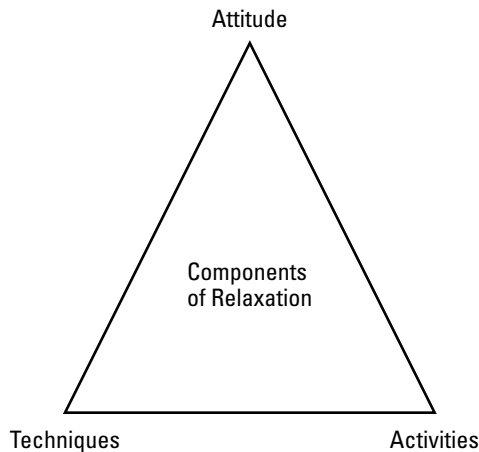


Figure 1-1: Three components of a relaxed lifestyle.

Discovering the relaxation response

When you're stressed, your body turns on your stress response (see Chapter 2). Your blood pressure rises and your body prepares to run or fight. This is

a process that's automatic and hard-wired in your body once triggered. No effective drug currently exists to counteract the harmful effects of chronic stress, so the best way to counteract stress with no known side effects is to regularly elicit your relaxation response.

The relaxation response is the opposite of the stress response. It is also automatic once triggered in the brain, releasing chemicals in your body that counteracts the stress response. When your relaxation response is activated, the following changes take place in your body and mind:

- ✓ Your muscles relax.
- ✓ Your blood pressure goes down.
- ✓ Your breathing slows down.
- ✓ You use less energy.

The part of your nervous system that controls stress and relaxation is called the *autonomic nervous system*. This system controls your heart rate, digestion, breathing rate, salivation, perspiration, pupil size, libido and urination. Some of these things are partly under your direct control, such as breathing, but some aren't, such as your pupil size and perspiration.

The autonomic nervous system has two sides: one side causes you to be stressed, and the other side causes you to relax: the *sympathetic nervous system* triggers your stress response – it's like your accelerator. The *parasympathetic nervous system* triggers your relaxation response – it's like your brake. The relaxation techniques in this book are designed to turn down the stress response, controlled by your sympathetic nervous system, and turn up your relaxation response, controlled by your parasympathetic nervous system.

You can think of these two systems as sides of a seesaw, as I show in Figure 1-2. The purpose of relaxation is to bring your seesaw back into balance. If you're too stressed at the moment, by putting in some relaxation techniques or doing your everyday activities with a more relaxed attitude, these will help to bring greater ease in your life.

Nobody is perfectly balanced all of the time. That's unnatural and an unhelpful aim to have. However, you can become better at noticing when you're leaning too far towards stress, and discover ways to shift the balance back, quickly and effectively. Using unhelpful coping strategies to manage your stress, such as isolating yourself, ignoring your problems or drinking excessive alcohol can end up leaning you further towards stress.

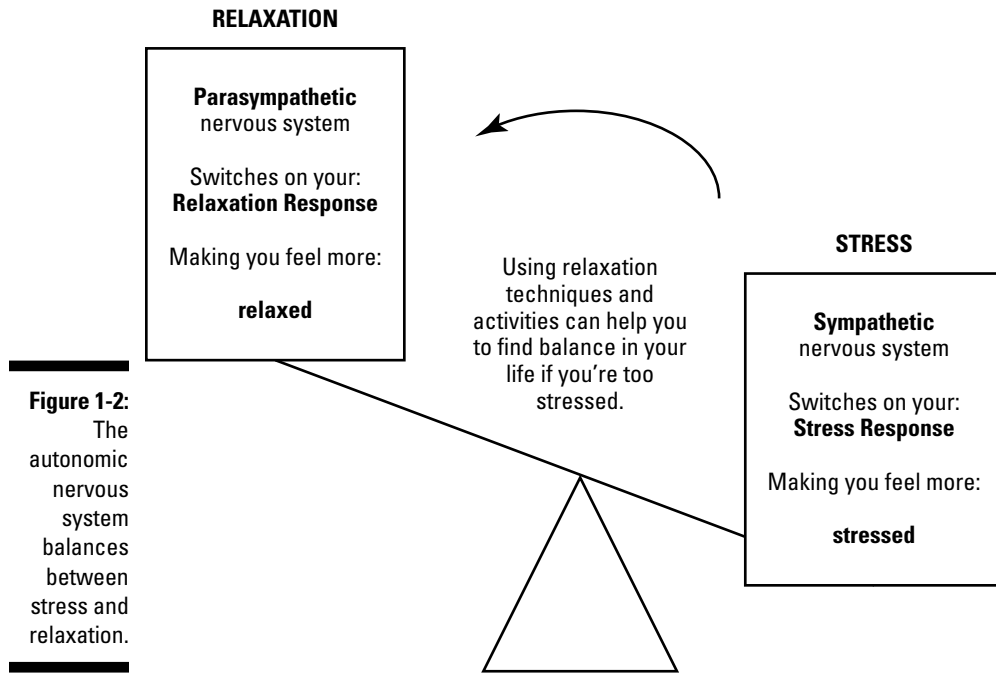


Figure 1-2:
The autonomic nervous system balances between stress and relaxation.

Benson, father of the relaxation response

Herbert Benson MD, pioneer in mind–body medicine, coined the term ‘relaxation response’ in the 1970s. Interestingly, he discovered the relaxation response in the exact same room in which Walter Cannon discovered the fight-or-flight (stress) response 50 years earlier!

The stress response takes place when a part of the brain called the hypothalamus is stimulated. Benson found that when a different part of the brain was activated, the opposite of the stress response occurred. He described the relaxation response as ‘a physical state of deep rest that changes the physical and emotional response to stress, such as lowered heart rate, blood pressure, muscle tension, and rate of breathing.’

Benson discovered the relaxation response because he was repeatedly approached by meditators using a technique called transcendental meditation (TM). When he finally agreed to test them, which he was nervous about because he was a respected Harvard scientist and didn’t want to get a reputation of being associated with esoteric ideas, he discovered that the meditators did relax well. They managed to reduce their blood pressure. But the meditation used a secret word, called a mantra. He tried the technique with a different word but the effect was the same. He eventually found that any word, phrase or object that you focus on with a passive attitude could trigger the relaxation response.

Figure 1-3 shows the different functions that the autonomic nervous system controls, and what happens when the stress response or the relaxation response are triggered.

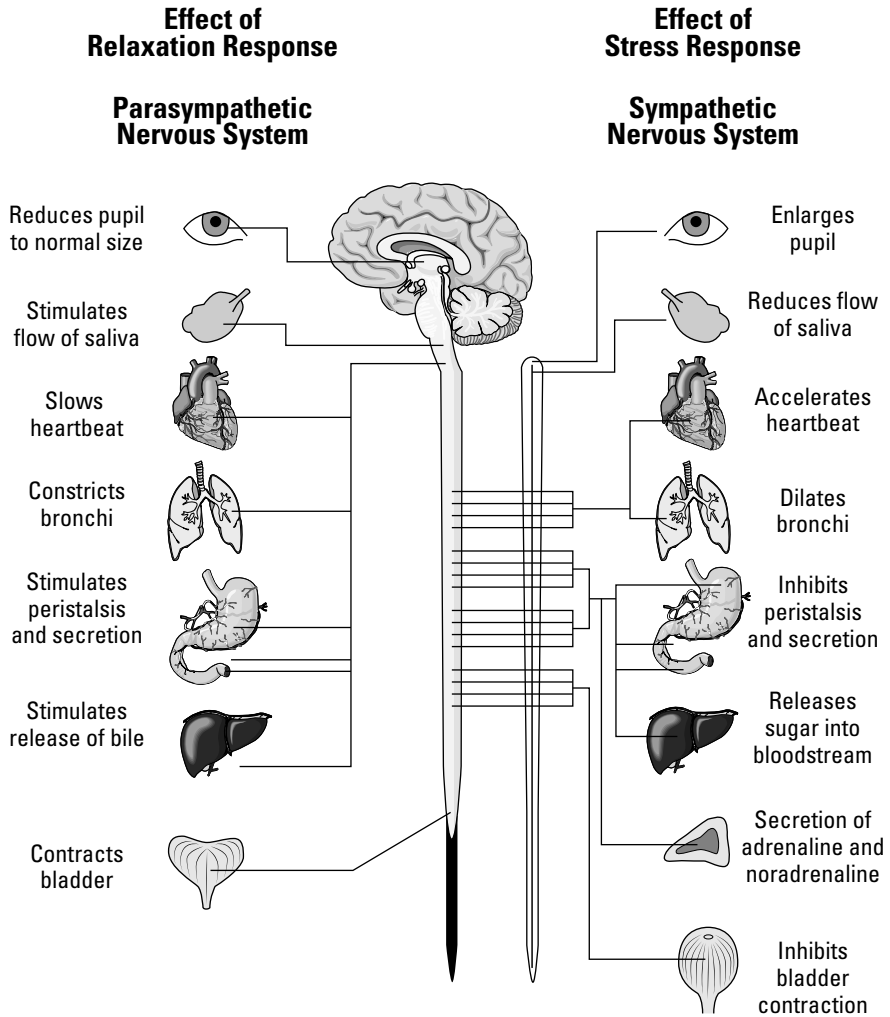


Figure 1-3: The autonomic nervous system, showing the effects of the stress response and the relaxation response.

Considering different dimensions of relaxation

You can think of relaxation in three dimensions – body, mind and spirit, as I show in Figure 1-4. Effective relaxation operates on all three dimensions. Each of the dimensions is like the legs of a three-legged stool. The stool is balanced in the way that your life feels. If you took a leg out, the stool would be unbalanced. In the same way, if you didn't give each dimension your proper attention, your life would feel out of balance and stress would creep in more easily.

- ✓ **Physical relaxation (body):** Using techniques to ease the tension from your body.
- ✓ **Psychological relaxation (mind):** Using ways of calming your mind, reducing anxiety.
- ✓ **Holistic relaxation (spirit):** Reflecting on your own meaning and purpose in life, living your life according to your own values, feeling as if you're making a positive contribution in the world, and developing a sense of 'wholeness' in your life.



Spirituality certainly does not require a religious belief.

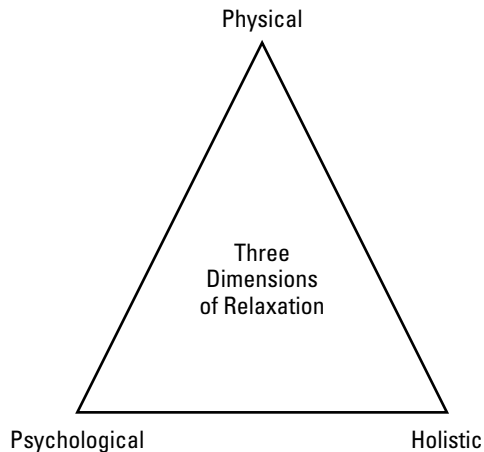


Figure 1-4:
The three
dimensions
of relax-
ation.

Looking at the main ways to relax

In this section, I give a brief overview of the main techniques you can use to relax your body, mind and spirit. Although I separate these techniques into three different groups, the groups all overlap. For example, you can't relax

your body using a breathing technique (body) if you don't also give your full attention to the process (mind) and have a sense of looking after your health (spirit).

Body techniques

Body techniques are based on releasing muscular tension in your body. (See Part 2 of this book for chapters about body-centred relaxation techniques.) The main body techniques are:

- ✓ Progressive relaxation
- ✓ Breathing exercises
- ✓ Physical exercise
- ✓ Yoga, t'ai chi and qi gong
- ✓ Biofeedback
- ✓ Massage and self-massage

Mind techniques

Mind techniques are based on being aware of your thoughts, and then stepping back from your thoughts, stopping your thoughts, changing your thoughts to be more realistic and positive, or seeing your thoughts in a different way. Mind techniques help to soothe your mind and include the following:

- ✓ Meditation, including mindfulness
- ✓ Guided imagery
- ✓ Self-hypnosis
- ✓ Cognitive behavioural techniques
- ✓ Music
- ✓ Problem-solving techniques
- ✓ Humour

Spirit techniques

Spirit techniques focus on holistic methods to create greater meaning and purpose in your life, and opportunities to explore old barriers you've created between yourself and others. Ultimately they're not techniques, but ways of living. Spirit techniques include the following:

- ✓ Gratitude and self-compassion
- ✓ Connecting with others through socialising or a shared interest perhaps
- ✓ Prayer, meditation, chanting and singing

- ✓ Volunteering, showing kindness to others and being generous
- ✓ Reflecting on your own inner thoughts and feelings and writing them in a journal
- ✓ Forgiveness

Appreciating relaxation as mind–body medicine

The natural healing force within each one of us is the greatest force in getting well.

Hippocrates

In the East, mind and body have always been seen as totally related and interconnected. Ayurveda (traditional Indian medicine) and traditional Chinese medicine seek to treat body and mind. In the West, however, for many years medicine focused on fixing the body and ignoring a person's thoughts, emotions and lifestyle as a possible contributor to the disease.

Now we know that mind and body are closely interconnected. The field of medicine called mind–body medicine uses the power of thought and emotion to aid the healing process. Most prestigious medical institutions around the world now have mind–body programmes. Mind-body medicine is no longer considered an alternative treatment to traditional medicine and has become an accepted part of mainstream medicine in some institutions.

When you're stressed, you release stress hormones into your bloodstream, affecting all your bodily organs. Negative, aggressive attitudes increase the chance of heart disease, obesity, diabetes and cholesterol. Your attitude can affect how long you live with a chronic disease or whether you contract a life-threatening ailment.



For example, research into people living with HIV found that those who had a faith in God, a sense of compassion towards others, a feeling of inner peace, or who were religious, lived longer than those who didn't have these values. In another study looking at women with late-stage breast cancer, the women in a weekly support group lived twice as long as those who weren't in the support group.



Not all pressure is bad for you. A sense of pressure releases norepinephrine, which helps create new memories and improves mood. Problems feel like challenges and the creative thinking stimulates new connections in your brain. The problem is when pressure becomes too high for you – what I define as stress. You need to reduce your stress, not eliminate all pressure.

Placebo effect – mind affects body all the time

Every high-quality experiment carried out using medication requires the experiment to be repeated using a placebo (dummy pill). This is because whenever people take a pill that they think will make them feel better, it often makes them feel better whether or not it is medicinal. In many cases placebos have been shown to

reduce symptoms of pain, anxiety, depression, Parkinson's disease and inflammatory disorders. Scientists are not sure why placebos work so well – they suspect it is because hormones are released into your bloodstream due to expectations in your mind – with no actual medicine at all.

Having fun with relaxation

Relaxation is likely to be more elusive if you have a tendency to take life too seriously. If you are under a lot of stress or have depression, you probably don't think anything is much fun.

Try to work through the exercises and techniques in this book in a light-hearted way. After you find a technique that you enjoy, try to stick to the approach and reap greater benefit from it.

Children are good at having fun. Some researchers claim that children laugh on average 300 times a day, compared with 20 times for an average adult. Children have fewer responsibilities than adults, but we can still learn from them. You probably laughed a lot as a child and still have that capacity within you to have fun and relax. Slowly and surely, as you begin to put more 'me time' into your life, and enjoy a taste of relaxation from time to time, you'll find a smile appear on your face when you see the blue sky or the eyes of a child or hear the gentle sound of rain on your roof.

See Chapter 13 for more on cultivating humour and playfulness.

Discovering the Benefits of Relaxation

The more I research relaxation, the more I am astonished by its benefits. This helps to motivate me to ensure that I put relaxing activities and techniques at the top of my list of priorities. Health is important for everyone, and keeping stress at a reasonable level is a vital part of healthy living. I encourage you to enjoy relaxing through socialising and staying fit, as well as practising daily relaxation techniques to elicit the healing power of the relaxation response.

Effects of relaxation on your body

When you're stressed, your body is in a state of alarm or shock; your body is acting as if it's about to be eaten by a sabre-toothed tiger. You discover that you've no energy to start fighting that flu you have, or digesting breakfast. You're going to be sabre tooth's breakfast if you don't act fast! All your energy goes away from digestion, immune function, reproduction and growth.

When you relax, your body starts working on long-term projects to look after your health and wellbeing. Your immune system and digestion are energised. In a more relaxed state, you're less likely to get ill, you digest your food effectively and efficiently, and you feel generally more comfortable. Your muscles don't need to be tense when you relax, because you're not about to start running or fighting, so you save energy physically.

Research shows that relaxation has a positive effect all the way down to your genes, promoting long-term physical health. Relaxation slows down the rate of ageing by reducing the rate at which bits of your DNA wear out. Relaxation helps you live a longer, healthier, happier life.

Effects of relaxation on your mind and emotions

Relaxation turns on the more advanced, emotionally intelligent part of your brain. When you relax, you can think clearly and don't focus too much on your worries and concerns. Stress creates a tunnel vision type of thinking, whereas relaxation helps you see things from the stand of 'the bigger picture'.

Relaxation helps you with creativity. You're more positive and willing to take risks in your relaxed state of mind. You don't see everything as a threat but more as an opportunity. A relaxed mind is generally better able to focus. You can do your tasks more efficiently, without wasting energy. You are more hopeful about the future. You feel calmer and happier.

Effects of relaxation on your behaviour

Stress makes you react automatically to most things as if they are a threat, whereas relaxation gives you space to reflect. When you relax, you're more likely to respond wisely rather than react automatically to a new situation or what someone says. As you're more focused, you can pay attention to the tasks you need to do and get them done quickly. You complete your work with greater precision and less likelihood of mistakes.

Relaxation improves your relationships. Your emotional intelligence is heightened and you respond to your partner's requests with more understanding instead of starting arguments.

Being more relaxed means you don't move from one emergency to another. Instead of living life on survival mode, you step back and think about what you want from your life.

Lower levels of stress mean you don't snap at your children and other people so often. Your mood is more balanced. Children copy what their parents do, so by being in a relaxed state of mind, you're better able to offer a positive role model.

Uplifting your spirit with relaxation

If you're religious, you may pray, chant or attend worship. Your religion can give you social support, offers an opportunity to rest and reflect, and adds meaning and purpose to your life. Through this process, you're better able to handle difficulties in your life as you see them as part of a bigger picture.

If you're not religious, spiritual relaxation may mean seeking meaning through art, nature, a hobby, voluntary work, or living in a philosophical or ethically meaningful way. You may practise secular forms of meditation, such as the relaxation response meditation or mindfulness meditation. These techniques are among the most powerful ways to both relax, with all its benefits, and train your brain to be more emotionally positive and resilient in the face of future life demands and challenges.

Letting Relaxation into Your Life

Moving from a stressed, frantic lifestyle to one of relaxation and calm focus isn't an instant process. It has taken years to build up the various habits and tendencies that compound the stress in your life, so it will take some time to undo the stress – perhaps not years but at least a few months.

A life of greater relaxation is built on having the right attitude to relaxation in the first place (I talk more about attitudes in Chapter 3). From there, you may like to take stock of how stressed you are and the causes of your stress. Doing relaxation techniques without knowing the source of your stress may help you a little, but the underlying causes will still be there. A balanced combination of relaxation together with sorting out the specific causes of your stress is best, whether the cause is your inner thought processes or external demands.

Clarifying where you're starting from

Many of my clients first realise they have an issue with stress when they become ill, either with a physical illness such as a heart problem or with a psychological illness such as depression, clinical anxiety or panic attacks.

Humans are creatures of habit. To begin living a more relaxed lifestyle takes some determination and time. If you're a motivated and disciplined person, you can probably follow my suggestions in this book easily. But if you're like many people, finding the time and inner resolve to carry out the relaxation techniques, or reorganise your life balance to begin living in a more relaxed and calm way, is a big challenge.

The first step is to take stock of how your life is going at the moment, how much tension you carry around with you, how agitated and irritable you are on a daily basis, and what your health's like. In Chapter 2, I include some exercises to help you identify how stressed you are and how urgently you need to begin your journey from too much stress to a relaxed, calm, focused way of living.

Overcoming resistance to relax

There may be a range of reasons why you don't actively pursue relaxation in your life. Here are some possible reasons and what to do if they apply to you:

- ✔ **You don't know how to relax.** You know you need to relax, but whenever you have the time, you simply read a paper or call up a friend. But you still feel a constant underlying tension in your body and worries in your mind. You don't know how to let that tension go. Trying out the relaxation audio tracks and creating a relaxation plan will help you.
- ✔ **You don't think you have time to relax.** You wake up as late as possible and rush from one task to another. Any spare time is filled with errands to do, or you have a very low energy level. Time management skills can help you to find time to relax. If the President of the United States can find time to relax, you can too.
- ✔ **You feel guilty or ashamed spending time on relaxation.** This is a common reason. We live in a society where anything we do for ourselves feels selfish. But remember, when you're on a plane, you're always instructed to put your own oxygen mask on before you help another, even your child. Why? Because if you don't look after yourself, you can't look after others. It's the same with relaxation. If you don't take time to rest, you get ill and inefficient. How can you then help others? If anything, it's selfish *not* to take out time to relax.

- ✔ **You don't think you need to relax, despite your lack of health or wellbeing.** You may think stress is just 'normal'. You may ignore health warnings and put them down to everyday modern living. Looking more carefully at any symptoms of stress you're experiencing may help you to see how high your stress levels are, and how urgently you need to act. If you have a stress-related illness, a visit to your doctor may motivate you to take action.
- ✔ **You don't have the willpower to relax.** You know what you need to do to relax, but can't find the inner resolve to actually carry it out. Crashing out in front of the TV or staying in bed for an extra 20 minutes instead of doing your daily relaxation is just too tempting. Your stress makes you feel fatigued and you get into a negative cycle, unable to find the energy to relax. Reading a book such as this, joining a relaxation or exercise class, or relaxing with a friend can give you a little nudge in the right direction.



If you keep putting off your relaxation time, practise a relaxation technique for a minute. Tell yourself 'I'll do just one minute now, and do more if I feel like it'. Most of the time, people start to enjoy the relaxation technique and extend the time they spend on it.

Starting to use relaxation techniques and activities

If you're like most of my stressed-out clients, you make little time for relaxation. You may lead a very busy and intense lifestyle with a lot of responsibilities or work in an environment that's very challenging for you. You may like the idea of relaxing more but just don't know where to go or what to do. But you do know that something needs to change.



I suggest you read the first three chapters of this book. Then look at the range of relaxation techniques and activities throughout the book and choose one technique that appeals to you. Apply your chosen technique on a daily basis for a few weeks and notice what effect it has on you. If the technique works for you, continue to use it. If you find the technique has no effect at all, drop it for now and move on to try a different approach. This process of trial and error will lead you to the perfect technique or combination of techniques for you.



Everyone is different. Every person has a completely unique upbringing, set of genes, attitudes and life experiences. Each person achieves a balance of relaxation techniques and activities that's right for them. No one perfect technique works universally for everyone. The techniques I include in this book have been tested on thousands of people and found to work for the majority of people, but you need to find your particular preference.

Building relaxation into your daily life

To live a more relaxed and healthy life, more able to cope with the pressures that life throws at you, I recommend you practise a relaxation technique daily that you enjoy and that's suitable for your temperament and personality.

Try to look for opportunities to ease off from time to time. You don't have to wait till your stress levels are sky high and you have a stomach ulcer before you reach for this book. As mindfulness meditation expert Jon Kabat-Zinn says, 'Weave your parachute every day rather than leave it to the time you have to jump from the plane.'

Practise relaxation when you feel relatively calm as well as when you feel stressed, to buffer you against future stressors. For example, if you're waiting in traffic, do some deep breathing. When you've finished writing your report, go for a gentle stroll around the block. After putting the children to bed, soak in the bath for a while. Do some mindful yoga stretches at home before you head to your aerobics class. Be creative and think of clever ways to integrate relaxation in your life. In this way, relaxation becomes a way of life that you look forward to instead of yet another thing to add to your 'to do' list.



Here are a few suggestions to build relaxation into the daily grind:

- ✔ **Use 'waiting time' as time to do some simple relaxation techniques.** You could do some guided imagery as you wait in the queue at the post office.
- ✔ **Each time you finish one activity, and before you start another, take a few moments to relax.** For example, once you arrive home in your car, just sit for a few moments and connect with one of your senses to help you to let go of the stresses of driving before entering your home.
- ✔ **Make a list of things you do on a typical day.** See if there are any activities you find draining that you can stop, and any activities you find relaxing that you can start or do more of. For example, cut out surfing online everyday and join a local meditation class instead.



Everyone has days when they don't feel like doing their relaxation technique or find relaxation boring. That doesn't mean you need to give up. Just like going to the gym, you reap the rewards from relaxation in the long term. Try to keep practising, whether you like it or not, and then enjoy the benefits. With experience and practice, you'll come to enjoy using relaxation techniques and be able to enter a state of relaxed focus and inner calm within a very short time – that's something to look forward to! Just be as patient with yourself as you can, and you'll get there in time.