

# Stress Management and Relaxation Techniques After Stroke

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You and your caregivers may experience stress and anxiety at some point in your recovery as you adjust to the physical, cognitive and emotional changes following a stroke. You and your caregivers can use the stress management and relaxation techniques described below to help you successfully cope with stress and anxiety.

## **What are some techniques I can use to manage my stress and anxiety?**

There is no single technique that is best for everyone. Below are techniques you and your therapist can discuss to see what works best for you. You may even find that alternating or combining different techniques provide the best results.

### **Breathing Exercises:**

- Pursed lip breathing:
  1. Inhale through your nose with your mouth closed for a count of 2
  2. Exhale through tightly pressed (pursed lips) for a count of 4
  
- Square breathing:
  1. Inhale for a count of 4
  2. Hold your breath for a count of 4
  3. Exhale for a count of 4
  4. Hold your breath for a count of 4

- **Rubber band breathing and color breathing** are additional techniques to promote relaxation through breathing. Ask your therapist if you would like to learn more.

### **Progressive Muscle Relaxation:**

This technique is used to reduce tension within the body. It may be beneficial to use a recording. The following are steps you can use to practice progressive muscle relaxation:

1. Assume a comfortable position and close your eyes.
2. Take a few minutes to breathe in and out in slow, deep breaths.
3. When you are ready, focus on tightening one muscle group at a time.
4. Start at your feet and move up towards your face. Hold each contraction for a count of 5 seconds, then release and exhale.
5. Move slowly up through your body, contracting and relaxing the different muscle groups.
6. Relax as you think about the stress leaving your body.

### **Visualization**

Visualization means imagining a detailed image of an attractive and peaceful setting or environment. The following steps are helpful:

1. Assume a comfortable position in a quiet environment.
2. Close your eyes and imagine yourself in a peaceful place.
3. Take a few slow, deep breathes to center your attention and calm yourself.
4. Focus on your different senses (seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, and taste) to help make it more vivid in your mind.
5. Imagine yourself smiling, feeling happy and having a good time.

## **Meditation**

There are many types of meditation used to reduce stress and promote relaxation. Different ways to meditate include:

- Guided meditation (with an instructor)
- Mindfulness meditation
- Mantra meditation
- Prayer
- Reflection

Ask your therapist if you would like to learn more.

## **Journaling**

There are many benefits to keeping a journal. Journaling reduces stress by:

- Allowing you to sort out and clarify your thoughts and emotions
- Helping you organize your thoughts
- Providing an outlet to express emotions
- Helping you to gain perspective on a situation.

If you are unable to write, talk to your therapist about technologies that support journaling.

## **Open Communication:**

It is important to talk with a family member, friend or care provider about how you are feeling. It is important for you to feel heard and have your feelings validated.

## **Music:**

Listening to music minimizes stress and depression while having a calming effect on your body and mind.

