

Relaxation



*Learn the Simple Methods for
Self-Soothing and Reducing
Stress*

The Gottman Institute

These instructions are suggestions. Please do not engage in any activity that does not feel right for you. Make any modifications that are beneficial.

Relaxation

According to John Gottman's research, one predictor of relationship quality and stability is a couples' physiology when discussing a conflict. Heart rate, cortisol levels, and tension are often high for partners when a relationship is troubled. This creates a feeling of overwhelm and unmanageable stress, which can suppress the immune system. People with chronic relationship stress get sick more easily, and are more likely to leave their relationship than those who learn how to calm and soothe themselves.

What Causes Stress?

Your body has a general alarm mechanism inherited through evolution from our hominid ancestors. This mechanism is used to mobilize your body so it can effectively cope with emergencies that might injure you. It is called Diffuse Physiological Arousal, or DPA for short.

DPA happens very quickly in situations that feel emotionally or physically threatening. Unconscious "fight or flight" patterns kick in, focusing your attention so acutely that you often experience tunnel vision and hearing. Your heart rate surges, adrenaline and blood pressure rise, and the blood flow to your gut and kidneys slows down.

Why is This Important?

These physiological changes make it much harder to problem

solve. DPA allows us to only hear and see signals of danger and nothing else. We are then likely to verbally attack or be defensive. Empathy and creative thinking fly out the window, along with our positive communication skills.

Pursuing, Distancing, and Flooding

Often one partner brings up an issue to try and resolve a problem that's creating emotional distance. The other partner either doesn't want to talk about it, or thinks there really isn't a problem. If the issue is raised too negatively, the receiving partner flees the conversation or winds up escalating the conflict and rejecting all input from the speaker. The interaction gets progressively worse and leads one or both people to become "flooded" with DPA.

When we flood or move into DPA, it feels like our partner's complaints come out of nowhere; the negativity is very upsetting and disorienting. Our partner's needs suddenly seem like a list of impossible, impractical, and unreasonable demands that we can't meet. We would like nothing more than get it all to stop and go away. In this state, we can't listen; healthy conflict resolution is physically and emotionally unreachable.

Why is Relaxed Physiology Crucial?

Just as aerobic fitness requires an ideal heart rate, so does healthy personal interaction. When discussing conflict, heart rate should be well below 100 beats per minute. Any more, and flooding can occur. Restoring calm in themselves and in one another helps couples make the relationship a safe harbor instead of a source of stress.

Ideally, physiological soothing should be associated with the

presence and voice of your partner. This reverses the “need to escape” feeling that usually results in flooding. To accomplish this, we recommend that during non-conflict times, you consider taking turns using the Five Secrets below to soothe one another.

The Nature of a Good Break

When one member of a partnership is flooded, partners should briefly separate in order to calm down. Before separating, it's essential for partners to agree on a time to get back together to continue the discussion.

For a break to be effective:

- **It must be at least twenty minutes long.** Why? Because norepinephrine, the main sympathetic neurotransmitter, doesn't have an enzyme to degrade it, so it must be diffused through blood. This takes twenty minutes or more in the cardiovascular system.
- **It cannot involve “distress maintaining” thoughts**, like, “I don't have to take this,” or, “What a jerk, I'll show him.”
- **It must involve a truly relaxing activity**, such as listening to calming music or taking a walk around the block.

**Flooding leads people to
reject incoming information.**

**Being soothed allows them to
accept information.**

The Five Secrets to Calming Yourself

1. *Get control of your breathing.* When you are flooded, you will find yourself either holding your breath or breathing shallowly. Sit or lie down comfortably. Alter your breathing by taking deep, regular, even breaths. Take your time inhaling and exhaling.
2. *Find areas of muscle tension in your body.* First, tense each group of muscles and then relax them. Start with your legs, then move up to your back, arms, shoulders, neck, and face, focusing especially on your jaw and forehead.
3. *Let the tension flow out of each muscle group and feel its heaviness.*
4. *Let the tension flow out of each muscle group and feel its warmth.*
5. *Focus your attention on one calming vision or idea.* Try imagining a very comforting place, like a forest or a beach. Visualize this place as vividly as you can as you calmly breathe.

Remember to:

- Breathe deeply and evenly from the belly.
- Tense specific muscle groups, hold the tension, then relax.
- Feel the natural heaviness in your relaxed muscles.
- Feel the warmth in your relaxed muscles.
- Imagine a soothing visual image.

RELAXATION EXERCISE

Instructions:

Partners can either use this exercise to self-soothe by reading the text below to themselves, or read to one another while the listener follows along and relaxes.

If you are doing this exercise with a partner, the reader should keep their voice relaxed and even, speaking in a soothing monotone. Be sensitive to facial expressions that may indicate the listener's discomfort, and respond to these cues, trying to make the listener as comfortable as possible. Over time make these instructions more personal. Speak SLOWLY and EVENLY.

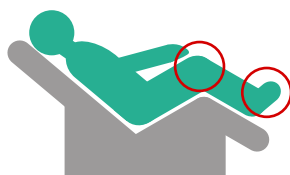
1. Find a nice comfortable place to sit with your feet resting flat on the floor and your back supported by a back rest either on a couch or chair.
2. Turn off any noise or distractions in the room, such as a television, radio, or cell phone.
3. Close your eyes if it is comfortable for you.
4. Please hold the tension in each part of your body for at least 10 seconds before releasing.

The first thing you need to do is to focus on your breathing.

Put your hand on your belly and as you take a nice deep breath in, push your hand out with your belly as if your belly was a balloon filling up with air. Then, as you exhale, push your hand back down against your belly and feel your belly deflating. Take another nice deep breath in and push your hand out. Then, as you exhale push your hand back down against your belly. Every time you take a nice deep breath in, just feel your hand goes out as your stomach expands, and then as you exhale, gently pushing against your stomach as the breath leaves your body.

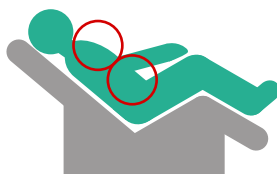
Continue to breathe this way. Take another nice deep breath in and exhale, another and exhale, and then a last nice, deep breath in and exhale. Now, as you continue to breathe normally, you should be sitting either on a sofa or in a chair. Lift your left leg up straight in front of you, pull your toe up towards your knee, and tense all the muscles in your left leg. Feel them tense, including your quadriceps and your calf muscles, and now release your leg and drop your leg back down. Take another nice deep breath in. That's it, good.

Now, do the same with your right leg. Raise your right leg straight ahead of you. Pull your toe up towards your knee flexing your foot, and tighten all the muscles in your right leg. Feel really, really tight in your calves and quadriceps, hold it and then release your leg back down. Relax both legs and take another nice deep breath in.



Next, move to your lower back. Arch your lower back by pushing your belly out towards the opposite wall and pulling your shoulders back. Create a nice arch in your back and feel the tension in your lower back—feel it tighten. Now, release that tension and allow your back to rest against the back of your chair or sofa. And just relax. Let that chair really support you.

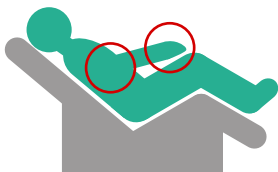
The next step is to raise both arms straight ahead of you and tense all the muscles in your arms by first clenching your fists really tightly, both fists. Then, stretch your fingers out towards the opposite wall, reaching for that opposite wall with all your strength. Good. Now, drop your arms back down to your lap. Take another nice deep breath in. Good.



Now, raise your shoulders up, shrugging your shoulders way up towards your ears. Higher, higher; this is where you are holding lots and lots of pressure and burdens. Feel those shoulders lifting even higher and now drop your shoulders and circle them first in one direction, and then circle them in the opposite direction. And just feel the relaxation in your shoulders as you take another nice deep breath in.

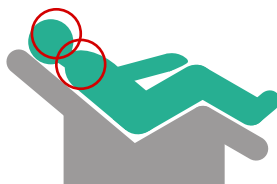
Now move to the lower jaw. Clench your teeth tightly together, very tight, that's it—that's where we all hold lots of frustration. And now release, circling your lower jaw first one direction, and then the other direction. Good. Now, relax your jaw and simply drop your head to the side so that you are moving your right ear towards your right shoulder—giving your neck some stretch. That's good, and now straighten your head up and drop the left ear towards the left shoulder. Stretch the other side of your neck now. That's it.

And now, return your head to a straight up position up and just relax your head now. Take a nice deep breath in.



And, finally, close your eyes, squeeze them tightly shut—as if you are shutting out the world and saying “no”—tight, tight. Very good. And now, simply relax your eyes, keeping your eyes lightly closed. Take another nice deep breath in, and imagine yourself under a warm waterfall. The water is pouring down over your head and body and rinsing away any remaining stress, any remaining tension in every little nook and cranny of your body. The water is flowing down, carrying all the remaining tension in your body down towards the earth, down over your head, down over your shoulders, down over your arms and the trunk of your body, down through your legs, down through your feet and down into the earth. You are feeling very warm, relaxed, and comfortable. Take another nice deep breath in. That’s it.

Now imagine yourself going to a place where you feel completely at peace. It might be a place outside, or perhaps one that’s inside. It’s a place where you can be completely safe, where it’s beautiful, where it’s quiet, where it really feels like a sanctuary—where you can feel completely at peace. Notice the colors, the shapes in this place. Look around you—see what’s in this place around you. Listen for any sounds that might be there in this place—are there any sounds? Feel the air on your skin. Does it feel warm or does it feel cool?



What feels best to you? Allow yourself to savor every bit of this experience—is there a fragrance in this place? Enjoy every aspect of this place. This is your sanctuary; this is your special place where you can always take yourself. You are going deep inside, following your breath, and letting yourself be completely relaxed and comfortable and at peace. Just enjoy now. And, when you are ready, you can come back to the place where you are now sitting. Slowly, when you feel ready, open your eyes, look around you and return to the here and now.

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OTHER GOTTMAN RELATIONSHIP GUIDES:

Small Things Often

How to Be a Great Listener

Aftermath of a Fight

Fondness & Admiration

Avoid the Four Horsemen

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