

Dr. Breus, aka “The Sleep Doctor”

Relaxation exercises have been shown to be highly effective in reducing stress and improving sleep. Here are my 3 go-to stress reducers for times of stress:

1) Breathing

Deep, slow, self-aware breathing is an ancient, powerful way to clear the body of stress and tension, and a great way to relax as part of a nightly transition to sleep. Deep breathing kicks off a series of physiological changes that aid relaxation, including reducing muscle tension, slowing breathing rate and heart rate, lowering blood pressure and metabolism.

A breathing practice can be as simple as taking a series of even, slow inhale and exhale breaths as a regular routine during the day, or whenever you feel anxious or stressed. There are also a multitude of structured breathing exercises. Here is one of my favorites.

4-7-8 breathing

In a comfortable position, with your eyes open or closed:

- Inhale for 4 seconds
- Hold breath for 7 seconds
- Exhale slowly, for 8 seconds
- Repeat several times

Deep breathing helps your body and mind relax and promotes good sleep. By taking a deep inhalation and holding your breath, you're increasing your body's oxygen level, allowing your body to have to work slightly less hard to function. A long, slow exhale has a meditative quality to it that is inherently relaxing. That slow exhale is also very similar to the pace of breathing your body adopts as you're falling asleep. By deep breathing before bedtime, you are, in a way, mimicking the breathing patterns of sleep onset, and nudging your body and mind toward its all-important period of rest.

2) Guided imagery

Think about tasting a tart or sour food—maybe sucking on lemon or a lime or swallowing a teaspoon of vinegar. Really imagine this experience: the smell, the taste on your tongue, the sensation as the food hits your throat. What happened? You likely had a physical reaction to this imagery. Maybe your lips puckered, or your mouth watered. That is the power of imagination, and of guided imagery. When we imagine something, our bodies respond as though they were actually experiencing that imagined moment.

Guided imagery is a [mind-body technique](#) that can be used to reduce stress and promote sleep. Guided imagery exercises engage all the senses in a focused period of imagination. This powerful mind-body tool helps to connect the conscious mind with the unconscious mind, which helps direct the body toward positive, desirable responses. [Guided imagery](#) can be tailored and targeted to different goals, including relieving physical and mental stress, reducing anxiety, preparing for and bringing about sleep. Guided imagery is another terrific component of a nightly pre-bed routine. Spending a few minutes engaged in a soothing, restful guided image journey—such as imagining yourself floating peacefully in a calm ocean, being rocked by gentle waves and covered by a warm breeze—can help you gently separate from the stresses of the day and prepare the mind and body to sleep.

There are several different levels and forms of guided imagery that range from visualizations to more organized and targeted imaginative scripts and storytelling. It's possible to learn guided imagery on your own. It can also be valuable to seek the assistance of a therapist or practitioner in developing a guided imagery practice.

3) Progressive relaxation

This mind-body relaxation technique is a simple, striking way to become familiar with your body and the places where you hold stress and tension. [Progressive relaxation](#) involves working one at a time with different areas and muscle groups of the body, first tensing and relaxing them. This practice cultivates an awareness of what both tension and

relaxation feel like in your body. With that awareness you become better prepared to address that physical tension and any mental or emotional stress that accompanies it.

Used as part of a nightly power down routine, progressive relaxation can help you release physical and mental tension that, left unaddressed, can interfere with sleep. A typical progressive relaxation routine starts at the lowest point of the body—the feet—and works gradually up to the top of the head, tensing and relaxing every area of the body along the way.