



By Phyllis Pilgrim

Relax, for Health's Sake!

You know exercise is important to your physical and mental health. Perhaps you even exercise to reduce stress. But research is beginning to show that unless exercise is balanced by periods of rest, exercise itself can become a stressor.

Some potential negative effects of excessive exercise include:

- decreased appetite
- elevated blood pressure
- elevated resting heart rate
- sleep disturbance
- body fat percent lower than it should be
- amenorrhea
- exercise "addiction"
- injuries from tired muscles—micro-tears that don't heal easily when muscles are worked continually
- hairline fractures in foot
- tiredness and depression

A balanced program that includes exercise *and* relaxation can help reduce the risk of many of these conditions.

MAINTAIN A HEALTHY BALANCE

Your trainer maintains balance in your exercise program by including cardiovascular, strength and flexibility training in your workouts. But it's up to you to maintain a healthy exercise/relaxation ratio in your everyday life. Be sure to include two more categories in your regime:

- coordination and balance (through activities like sports or dancing)
- relaxation (through meditation, massage or just soaking in a whirlpool)

Remember to monitor the following areas in your exercise program:

Intensity and Duration of Your Personal Workouts. The more you exercise, the less intensely you should exercise, and vice versa.

Your Sleeping and Eating Patterns. If you increase the duration or intensity of

your exercise, increase your food intake *and* your hours of rest.

Performance. One of the most striking characteristics of overtraining or staleness is decreased physical performance.

PROGRESSIVE RELAXATION

You don't have to include all the fitness categories every day, but you should always include relaxation! Some people find yoga classes beneficial. Or you might just set aside five or 10 minutes a couple of times a day to practice relaxation and breathing techniques, call up pleasant imagery and calming thoughts, or role-play successful outcomes. For starters, try the following strategies to practice progressive relaxation.

First, find a quiet, peaceful place where you aren't likely to be interrupted. Set a timer for 20 minutes and ensure you'll remain undisturbed for that time. Put on soothing, gentle music—or choose silence—and start the timer. Lie on a firm, cushioned surface or thick blanket with your arms open and palms up. You can choose among several positions, including the following:

- Lie with your legs out straight but relaxed.
- Rest your thighs over a bolster, with your knees bent and feet relaxing on the floor.
- Rest your lower legs on a chair, with your knees bent at a right angle.
- Or try other positions, just as long as you're comfortable!

Method. Lie in your preferred position and take a few deep breaths, focusing on the exhalations. Feel yourself becoming heavier and heavier. Surrender your body weight to gravity. Give yourself mental permission to relax.

Imagine your feet becoming relaxed. . . . Feel them sinking into the floor . . . followed by your legs . . . hips . . . lower back . . . abdomen . . . chest . . . shoul-

ders . . . arms . . . hands . . . fingers . . . head . . . and all your face muscles.

As you exhale, relax into each body part, allowing each part to feel very heavy. Let the music carry you into a pleasant daydream. Allow yourself to be with whatever thoughts come up, or drift into a deep sleep.

Ending the Relaxation. When the timer rings, stretch your arms overhead. Take long, slow, deep breaths; hug your knees to your chest; and roll over onto your side. Stay there a minute or so before sitting up sideways, bringing yourself back into the reality of the moment. You should feel alert but calm when you go about your business.

YOU CAN'T RUSH IT

The body takes time to shift gears from activity into the relaxation mode. You can't force it! If progressive relaxation doesn't suit your needs, try something else.

Exercise isn't the only thing that can make you feel good. A lot of anecdotal and experiential evidence suggests that good company, a hearty laugh, an altruistic act and a hug can also release the hormones of well-being and may keep you as hale and hearty as all the exercise in the world. ●

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