

Four Relaxation Techniques to Soothe Your Digestive Discomfort

Although digestive disorders are physical conditions, they do have an emotional component as well. This is not the erroneous and outdated notion that these conditions are "all in your head," but rather the idea that your mental and emotional states may affect your physical one. In this Special Report, Johns Hopkins reviews the benefits four proven relaxation techniques – progressive muscle relaxation, autogenic training, meditation, and guided imagery.

Although digestive disorders aren't caused by emotional or mental stress, they do appear to be closely related. For example, people with depression or anxiety tend to be more susceptible to irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), and several studies suggest that major life events and chronic stress may worsen or cause a relapse in IBS symptoms.

The situation is similar for ulcerative colitis. A 2006 study in the journal *Gastroenterology* reported that an experimental stress test caused physical changes that may exacerbate ulcerative colitis symptoms. Heart rate and blood pressure increased, as did other inflammatory responses that can trigger an outbreak of symptoms.

Relaxing is easier said than done, but some relaxation techniques may help you cope with the stresses that can worsen digestive disorders. Some of the most common relaxation techniques are progressive muscle relaxation, autogenic training, meditation, and guided imagery. These relaxation techniques most likely promote relaxation by reducing the activity of the sympathetic nervous system, which in turn leads to decreases in blood pressure, heart rate, respiratory rate, and muscle tension.

Relaxation techniques seem like a logical choice for the treatment of stress-related digestive disorders, and some small studies show promising results. However, until large, randomized, controlled trials confirm its effectiveness, relaxation should be used only in combination with proven treatments and not as a substitute for medication.

Four Ways To Relax

- **Relaxation Technique 1: Progressive muscle relaxation.** Progressive muscle relaxation involves tensing and relaxing the major muscle groups of the body while breathing slowly and deeply. Starting with the muscles in the face and moving down to those in the feet, each major muscle group is tensed one at a time and then slowly relaxed. The relaxation technique can also start with the foot muscles and move up the body. Progressive muscle relaxation focuses attention on feelings of

relaxation and the differences between tense and relaxed muscles.

- **Relaxation Technique 2: Autogenic training.** Like progressive muscle relaxation, autogenic training involves focusing on different parts of the body while breathing deeply and slowly. But instead of tensing and relaxing muscles, it involves imagining that certain body parts are becoming warm and heavy one at a time. The way autogenic training works isn't completely understood, but one theory is that as you relax the body, you also relax the autonomic nervous system, which controls involuntary functions like heartbeat, blood pressure, and digestion.
- **Relaxation Technique 3: Meditation.** Meditation is a relaxation technique that originated in India 3,000 years ago. There are many types, but the most common are transcendental meditation, breath meditation, and mindfulness meditation. Each involves sitting in a comfortable position in a quiet environment and focusing attention on something specific. In transcendental meditation, attention is focused on a simple word or sound; in breath meditation, the focus is on breathing in and out; and in mindfulness meditation, attention centers on thoughts that enter the mind.
- **Relaxation Technique 3: Guided imagery.** In guided imagery, people use their imagination to create relaxing images. The images should involve as many of the five senses as possible. For example, you may imagine yourself lying on a beach, smelling the salt air, hearing the roar of the surf, and feeling the warmth of the sun. Picturing these images supposedly has the same relaxing effect on the brain as actually experiencing them. With practice, people are able to conjure up these relaxing images anytime they feel stressed.

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