

# Relax Your Way To Better Performance

By Tim LaVallee



Athletes train and compete in an environment of high expectations. Expectations produce anxiety and stress. Athletes need to know and practice relaxation techniques to relieve stress and anxiety. There are many scientific studies that have been carried out that demonstrate the effectiveness of relaxation exercises in overcoming stress, improving health, and avoiding illness.

A Relaxation technique (also known as Relaxation training) is any method, process, procedure, or activity that helps a person to relax; to attain a state of increased calmness; or otherwise reduce levels of anxiety, stress, or tension.

Relaxation techniques and training are not "rocket science!" Relaxation exercises are easy to learn and implement, and can be remarkably effective in addressing stress, anxiety, all kinds of phobias, and other similar concerns.

If you feel stressed take a few moments out. Just watch and be aware of your breathing. Breathe naturally and gently; this will have a very powerful, calming influence on your mind. When you breathe in, feel that you are breathing in inner peace. When you breathe out, feel you are exhaling all your anxieties and worries. Relaxation can be this simple - it doesn't have to be complicated at all.

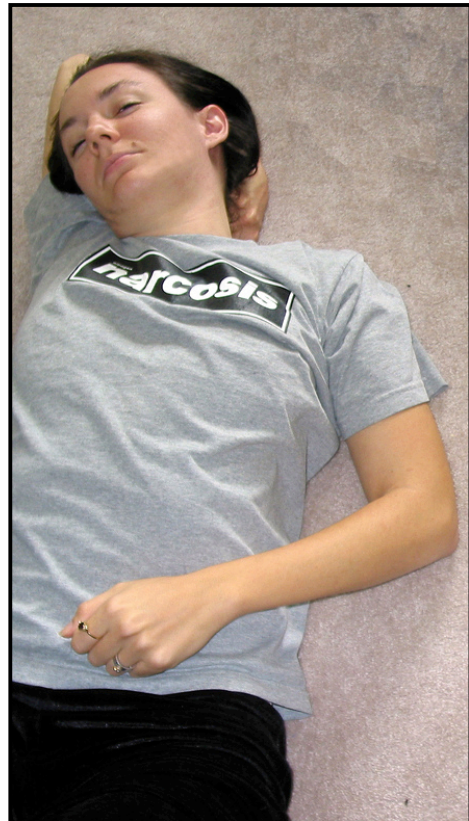
A more formal relaxation training exercise involves the systematic relaxation of major muscle groups by briefly flexing your muscles and then slowly releasing the tension (progressive muscle relaxation). It begins by having you flex your facial muscles, and continues with your neck and shoulders, and on down to your arms, abdomen, and legs. The exercise ends by directing you to breathe deeply and slowly as you review parts of your body. The entire exercise routine takes about nine minutes and is quite effective.

Another wonderful routine is a deep breathing exercise and can be done in any location. Deep breathing is a simple, but very effective, method of relaxation. It is a core component of everything from the "take ten deep breaths" approach to calming someone down, right through to yoga relaxation and Zen meditation. It works well in conjunction with other relaxation techniques such as progressive Muscular Relaxation described above, relaxation imagery, and meditation to reduce stress.

I have successfully used a deep breathing technique with athletes and with repeated practice have been able to get athletes to combine it with visual imagery training.

Choose a place that is quite with low illumination. Music can be played during the session. Research studies have found that listening to soothing music also enhances creativity. Pay carefully attention must be paid to selection and volume. It needs to be something the athletes will enjoy listening while relaxing both your mind and body.

Have the athletes get comfortable. I like to have them find a comfortable position on their back. A gym mat works great. Have them shut their eyes and ask them to listen to you and just follow your directions. In a low almost monotonic voice have them take a deep breathe through their nose to a ten count. Ask them to completely fill their diaphragm during the count to ten. The deeper you breathe, the more you relax. With the diaphragm full of oxygen, ask them to hold their breathe to your count of five.



While they are holding their breath, ask them to focus on a vision of a very pleasurable picture. It's individualistic but suggest a scene with vibrant colors, sounds, smells, tastes, textures, and emotion. Some may find the beach a place of relaxation, perhaps they see the blue water and sky, white sand and hear waves breaking on the beach, the sounds of seagulls, and taste the salt in the air. Perhaps it's watching snow flakes gently fall from the sky and the feel of the cool flakes on your face. After five seconds, ask the athletes to purse their lips slightly (as if to whistle) and breath the old air out slowly through their pursed lips. Exhalation should be 2-3 times longer than inhalation, so do not force the air out. This will take a little practice. During the exhale you can even get descriptive asking the athletes to feel the stale old air gently passing between their lips, etc. As the repetitions continue, in your monotonic voice, instruct the athletes to relax their body further and further with each breath. This breathing session will last 15 minutes. About 10 minutes into the session they will be so relaxed you will hear very heavy breathing and in fact some may have fallen to sleep. The 15 minute clock is important. With repeated practice, athletes will be able to do this on their own. Part of the training is to get them to set their internal clock at 15 minutes. It is going to be like a 15 minute, totally relaxed, "power nap."

At the end of your instructional 15 minute session you'll wake them up. Still speaking to the athletes, you will instruct them (in that monotonic, low voice) to open their eyes and lie quiet for a few minutes and just relax.

A word of warning. You should instruct athletes not to practice this late in the day if they want to sleep well at night. Just remember one of those power naps you couldn't resist taking just before dinner and how hard it was to get to sleep that evening. This is a powerful relaxation technique.

With repetitive practice the training program can be adapted to take place almost anywhere, on a van ride, at the start, etc. The time frame can be condensed from 20 minutes to 5 - 10 breaths. Athletes can also be taught to modify and replace the focused vision of something pleasurable during the exercise with skiing imagery visualization.

Performing breathing can be therapeutic, and with enough practice, can become your standard way of breathing. To breathe with the diaphragm, one must draw air into the lungs in a way which will expand the stomach and not the chest. It is best to perform these breaths as long, slow intakes of air - allowing the body to absorb all of the inhaled oxygen while simultaneously relaxing the breather. The

most beneficial effect comes from being comfortable, and in a position that nothing interferes with the body's ability to intake air.

- Practice a breathing relaxation exercise once a day.
- Expect your ability to relax to improve as you continue practicing, and expect to practice two or three weeks before you become genuinely proficient. Once you learn how to do the breathing exercise, you will no longer require verbal coaching, and you can tailor the exercise to your own liking.
- Avoid practicing the breathing exercise within an hour before or after a meal (either hunger or feeling full may distract you) or within six hours before going to sleep for the night.
- Adopt a calm, accepting attitude towards your relaxation practice. Don't worry about how well you're doing or about possible interruptions. Instead, know that with repetition your ability to relax and focus will grow.
- Once you've finished, look around and remain still another minute or two.
- As you become skilled at the exercise, try applying it to specific situations that might otherwise be anxiety provoking, such as the morning of a race, at the start, or oral presentations, difficult social situations, job interviews, and so forth.
- Just like physical, technical and tactical training, you'll get better with practice.

If you would like to be more focused in skiing, in school, or at work, if you'd like to get more accomplished, if you'd like to think more clearly, or feel more comfortable in your relationships, then relax.

When you relax, you re-energize, clear your mind, your biological systems are given the chance to slow down and work more efficiently. When you're relaxed, you're able to escape the every day demands. When you relax, you can focus on what's truly important for you.