

# Adult Communication

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*Relating to Others, Adult to Adult: Keeping Your Composure Up and Your Defenses Down*

Respect begets respect, right?

Have you ever felt powerless over your reaction to someone, got defensive, and behaved like a child for no other reason than you were somehow triggered by the other person's tone of voice or posture? (We all have.)

And were you aggravated with yourself because you let the other person get under your skin or behaved childishly? (Yep.)

And did you wonder if the problem was mostly your problem? (Me too.)

If you're like me, you had a hunch that if you hadn't gotten defensive, if you had let the evocative aspects of the question roll right past you, the conversation would have gone much better, simpler, quicker.

Ever heard of *Transactional Analysis*? Transactional Analysis is a framework for studying the interactions and verbal scenarios that play out between people. (One person sits in a room. Eventually, another person walks into that room. One of these two people will eventually speak to one another and thus begins the transaction of communication.) Eric Berne is the father of Transactional Analysis and famous for his book, "Games People Play," which I just finished reading.

What this is about is parent mode, adult mode, and child mode. Although Transactional Analysis is a heady, psychology-focused terminology, the concept of *Parent-Child-Adult* relating itself is an extremely simple, easy concept to get.

So, this isn't something you need therapy to put into action. This isn't something that you have to think much about or 'work on' before putting into action. You can put this technique into action immediately. Lucky you!

## SCENARIO #1

You're at the coffee shop, over at the fixings counter where the milk, cream, soy milk, sugar, stirrers, etc. are. The whole thing is a mess, spilled milk on the counter and sticky, used straws, napkins, and open sugar packets scattered about. And the often-used milk container is empty. The lady next to you picks up the empty milk container, holds it up, and says to the guy behind the counter, "Hey, your counter is a total mess and there's no milk in here!" (This is a complex situation because the perceived levels of "authority" can get really interesting.)

So, here, the customer is speaking in Parent mode (scolding) to the guy behind the counter. In response, the worker has the option to respond in Parent, Child or Adult mode:

"Uh oh, oh no, [nervously] I'm really sorry, ma'am. I'm going to come around and clean that mess up right away!" (*Child mode*)

In Child mode he's not going to respond to the most important issue (the milk) but take a confused, scatter-shot and emotional path.

Child mode is likely to feel bad and be the least productive

"Here you go," handing her a gallon of milk from behind the counter, "You can fill it up!" (*Parent mode*)

This Parent mode reaction isn't entirely unproductive, but it's awfully sassy and sparks may fly (especially in a workplace setting)

Or, "Thanks for the heads up! I can take care of that milk now and the mess in a bit — would you mind handing me that container?" (*Adult mode*)

This productive, calm Adult reaction takes maturity and keeping one's wits about you.

This is the kind of response strangers are likely to comment on ("Wow, you sure handled that beeyotch well!")

If the woman had spoken to him from Adult mode, we can't necessarily assume that he, too, would have responded back in Adult mode. It's possible that, had the woman said, "Excuse me sir, I'm afraid the milk is empty and I'm wondering if you'd please refill it for me?" that he would have barked, "Can't you see I'm busy?" (*Parent mode*.) We can never assume that our respect will be met with respect and maturity!

## SCENARIO #2

Let's say you're picking up your spouse (or girlfriend/boyfriend) from the airport, and you're LATE. Fun, right? You're sorry that you're late, and you don't have a good reason for it. Even if you were late because you were delivering a baby or there was an earthquake, your spouse still says, "How could you be late? Didn't you check the flight times?" Your spouse might not be angry, but rather, disappointed in that seemingly accusing, sad, sad way that's hard not to play into.

So, this is, again, an example of *Parent mode*, but emotionally, it's sprinkled with *Child mode* too. Your options:

"Please don't hate me, I'm such a dummy, I just can't get timing right. I always do this!" (*Child mode*)

This kind of response is really self-centered and turns the focus on you, you, you.

While this kind of response isn't really defensive and may not lead to a fight, it's problematic because it doesn't foster good communication at all

It's a form of not listening

"At least you're getting a ride — would you rather have paid a taxi?" (*Parent mode*)

This is super-defensive and very well could lead to an argument or a really, really quiet ride home

This kind of response doesn't recognize the emotional meaning behind the partner's comment and its deflective communication

"I really wish I had been on time, I'm sorry I wasn't. Believe me. I got mixed up on the time — totally my fault. But it's great to see you."

This works because it's responsible, recognizes the disappointment, it's honest, and it ends on a positive note — you realize that your spouse may be taking your lateness personally (the sprinkling of *Child* clues you in to this).

I hope two scenarios are enough for you to get an idea, and that you can imagine all the many, many others that take place in your life fairly regularly. Really, any communication is an opportunity to behave from *Child*, *Parent* or *Adult mode*.

Acting from *Adult mode* will set you free.

And, what's exciting about this tool is that it's not a single-purpose tool (like a lemon squeezer), it's a deluxe, multi-purpose tool (like a knife!) This tool tackles more than just one emotional-behavioral problem; it tackles a few at once. This is no time-waster!

Most of us who grew up with parents who were too child-like to raise us with healthy self-esteem, struggle with taking things personally, getting defensive, isolating, being dishonest with ourselves about our feelings, and just feeling bad and unworthy in general. With this tool—that is, starting to choose to act in Adult mode—we get opportunities to be honest about our feelings, we're forced to put our defenses aside, entertain the notion that we're not being criticized, we're challenged to de-personalize what others say (which prevents isolation)...and the list of benefits goes on and on! So I hope you'll see this as a new, deluxe multi-purpose tool that'll do a whole lot of good for you. (At the very least it'll make difficult conversations simpler and shorter.)

And in this, you're moving from a state of reaction to action. If you were to make just one change to free yourself from your emotional prison, it would be to become a person who acts! It would be to become a person who takes action, who's in control of your actions, accountable for your actions, and who stops going through life reacting to people, news, and events out of old, old habit. It's a big deal.

Talking and relating like an adult will feel more and more comfortable as you put this behavior into use; you'll begin to observe yourself, learn who you are, and feel more like that person in more and more of your interactions.

Good luck with it! (Let me know how it goes!)

# How to Forgive Yourself

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Forgiving yourself can be much harder than forgiving someone else. When you're carrying around a sense of blame for something that has happened in the past, this bundle of negativity burrowing deep into yourself can cause a never-ending, pervasive sense of unhappiness. Forgiving yourself is an important act of moving forward and releasing yourself from the past. It's also a way of protecting your health and general well-being. Here are some suggestions on how to forgive yourself.

## Steps

- 1. Practice Self-Acceptance.** You don't need forgiveness for being you. Forgiving yourself is about targeting the specific things that you feel bad about, not about the person you are. As a forgiveness technique, self-acceptance allows you to acknowledge that you're a good person, faults and all. It doesn't mean that you ignore the faults or stop trying to improve yourself but it does mean that you value yourself above those elements and cease to allow your faults to halt your progression in Life.
  - Love yourself and give yourself permission to heal.
  - Laugh more; it will give you more freedom to stop taking it all so seriously.
- 2. Understand The Importance Of Forgiveness.** Living in a state of being unable to forgive requires a lot of energy. You are constantly chewed up by fear of your vulnerability, burning with anger with the source of pain, and living with the constancy of sadness, hurt, and blame. This energy deserves to be put to better use, so that your creativity and abilities are fed, not your negativity. Forgiveness also allows you to live in the present instead of the past, which means that you can move into the future with a renewed sense of purpose focused on change, improvement, and building on experience rather than being held back by past hurts.
  - Some people are afraid to forgive themselves because they fear losing their sense of self that has been built on the back of anger, resentment, and vulnerability. In this case, ask yourself if that angry, easily hurt and reactive person is the identity you're keen to show the world and live with. Is the security of this mode of thinking worth the effort and harm it is causing you? It's better to have a small time of insecurity as you find your way again than to continue a lifetime bogged down in anger.
  - See forgiveness in a positive light. If you're bothered that forgiving suggests that you shouldn't experience strong feelings such as resentment and anger, try viewing it as the chance to feel strong positive feelings, such as joy, generosity, and faith in yourself. Switching it to thinking about what you'd gain rather than what you'd lose has the benefit of keeping you positive while minimizing the negative emotions.

3. **Take Into Account The Challenges Raised By Not Forgiving Yourself.** Not only do you allow yourself to remain stuck in the past, but not forgiving yourself takes a huge toll on your emotional and physical health. Inability to forgive is sourced from anger and resentment, two emotions that can wreak havoc with your health. Numerous studies have shown that people stuck in constant anger are more prone to disease and illness than people who can learn to forgive both themselves and others.
  - *Always remember that forgiving doesn't equate with forgetting. You're entitled to learn by experience and be guided by that experience. It's about leaving aside the resentment and self-inflicted berating that comes with remembering.*
4. **Accept Your Emotions.** Part of the struggle is often being unable to accept that you are experiencing such emotions as anger, fear, resentment, and vulnerability. Instead of trying to avoid facing these negative emotions, accept them as part of what is fueling your lack of self-forgiveness. A problem named is a problem ready to be tackled.
5. **Reflect on Why You're Trying to Hold Yourself to a Higher Standard than Anyone Else around You.** Perfectionism can cause you to hold too high a standard for your own behavior, a standard that you wouldn't hold anyone else to. And if your perfectionism causes you to be too hard on yourself, you are caught in a situation where self-forgiveness is very hard to do because it seems like acceptance of a substandard you. Remove yourself from this vicious cycle of thinking by doing what Martha Beck called "*welcoming imperfection*". Beck claimed that "*welcoming imperfection is the way to accomplish what perfectionism promises but never delivers.*" It allows you to accept that all human beings are imperfect, and you are human, and imperfect too.
  - If you are really struggling with perfectionism, consider counseling or therapy work to reduce its impact in your life. Read *How to control perfectionism* for more tips.
6. **Let Go of Other People's Expectations for You.** If you're stuck in a spiral of self-hate and never feeling good enough because of things that were once said to you, self-forgiveness is essential. You have no control over what other people do and say, and *many things are said and done unconsciously, often motivated by the other person's own shortcomings*. Living your life in self-loathing because you don't feel you lived up to someone else's expectations is based on making too much of another person's mixed-up feelings. *Forgive yourself for trying to live a life according to other's expectations and start making the changes needed to follow your own purpose instead.*
  - For every person who has been hard on you, remember that someone was hard on them. Break the chain of harshness by being kind to yourself, not trying to live up to someone else's expectations for you.
  - Whenever someone criticizes you unfairly, realize that they have just made it that much harder for themselves if they make a mistake or fail to fulfill their own perfectionist ideas. Take this moment to remember where you've come from and why you no longer want to live that way.

7. **Stop Punishing Yourself.** There is a frequent misunderstanding that forgiveness equates to forgetting or condoning. This misunderstanding can lead a person to feel that it is not right to forgive oneself because in the process of doing so, it's akin to an act of forgetting or condoning the past wrong. If this is the factor preventing you from forgiving yourself, keep in mind that forgiveness is a process of mindfulness in which you continue to remember what happened and you do not condone something that was "wrong" as suddenly "right".
- It's perfectly fine to say: "I am not proud of what I've done (or how I've devalued myself) but I'm moving on for the sake of my health, my well-being, and those around me." Affirming this is healthy and allows you to break the cycle of self-harm you've fallen into because you openly acknowledge what was wrong and the intention to set it right from now on.
8. **Think About What Will Improve In Your Life If You Can Release Yourself and How To Bring This Into Fruition.** As part of forgiving yourself, it's usually not enough to simply resolve to forgive yourself. Doing things to confirm the forgiveness process will help you to realize your self-forgiveness and to give you a new sense of purpose. Some of the things you might like to consider doing include:
- **Taking up meditation.** Meditation is an ideal way to find inner quiet, spiritual, self-realization, and physical relaxation. It will allow you to take time out, to tune into and appreciate the moment, and to get in touch with your inner self. Done regularly, meditation will improve your well-being and sense of self.
  - **Affirm your self-worth.** Remind yourself regularly that you are a valued and beautiful person and say simply: "I forgive myself" or "I will no longer let anger eat away at me", whenever the negative thoughts reappear.
  - **Keep a diary.** Write down your journey to forgiveness. Having the writing space to share your thoughts and feelings with, one that nobody else will ever read, is a liberating and self-enlightening way to breaking through negative approaches to your life.
  - **Seek therapy.** If you've tried hard to get over anger, resentment, and other fearful, out-of-control emotions but you're still struggling, connect with a therapist who can help guide you through to a better state of being. If therapy's not your thing, at least find one friend or more to talk to, and who will help to affirm your worth.
  - If you have a faith, draw strength from its teachings to support you.
9. **See Forgiveness As A Journey, Not A Destination.** If you're liable to thinking that you're unable to "get to" self-forgiveness, you may be sabotaging your chances of even starting the forgiveness journey. It helps to accept that forgiveness is an ongoing process and that you'll have your up days and your down days, as with most feelings and experiences in life. You may feel that you've reached a point of forgiveness, only to have something happen that causes you to feel it was all a wasted effort and that you're back to square one, angry and annoyed with yourself. The best approach is to let the slip-ups happen and see them as

minor setbacks in an otherwise more forgiving self. In addition, realize that forgiveness has no timetable; instead, you can do your very best to prepare yourself for the process and to get it started.

- Self-forgive in gradual stages. Start with valuing yourself and making a resolution to stop letting the past continue to haunt the present and direct the person you are now.
- Learn from what you've done in the past but value your whole self (see step 1 above on practicing self-acceptance).
- Enjoy positive experiences consciously and don't seek to downgrade them.
- Be grateful for what you do have — great relationships, a home, a family, an education, abilities, interests, hobbies, pets, health, etc. Look for the good in your life.
- Be self-compassionate. Shift your thoughts to more fulfilling, value-focused things when negative reproaches arise.
- Apologize if others have been involved and you have not already done so, or you have not done so genuinely. Only do this when you have changed your negative outlook and if doing so will not harm that person.

## Tips

- *The more stress you hold inside of you, the more damage you do to yourself.* Stress can sometimes lead you to releasing your anger out and harm yourself and others around you, but if you forgive yourself the anger will be gone and the bad stuff will be gone. The result is that you are more concentrated and better about the positive instead of the negative.
- *Whenever You Feel Guilt*, follow the Words of Les Brown, "*Forgive Yourself for Your Faults and Mistakes and Move On*," This will help you whenever you make a mistake.
- *Think About How You Have Forgiven Others In The Past.* Take the lessons from these experiences and apply them to your own situation; the reassuring aspect of this is that you know you have the ability to forgive; you just need to point that forgiveness in the right direction.
- *Your Past Mistakes Most Likely Made You Who You Are Today.* So don't look at them as mistakes. Look at them as guides or lessons.
- *Your Mistakes Do Not Define You.* Trust that you are a great person. Think about all the horrendous mistakes normal/good people have done and learned from. Your mistakes aren't even as bad!
- *Forgiving Yourself And Others Does Not Mean That The Past Is Forgotten.* It means to forgive; however, the memory does remain. This is the same as the cycle of grief.

- *Life Goes On So Forgive And Go On With Life.*
- *Get A Stress Toy/Tool (squeeze foam ball etc.)* When you start to feel guilty, play with your work with your toy/tool.
- *The Person We Are, Is The Result Of Both Positive And Negative Things Happening To Us In Life, As Well As The Positive And Negative Things We Have Done.* The manner in which we respond to negative events is as important as the way in which we respond to positive events. A person who is inclined to ruminate and make large of a negative event will be more prone to living in anger and resentment and expect future negativity than a person who sees negative things as isolated incidents that don't impinge on who they are as a whole.



# "I Was There Last Night."

By Robert David Clark

A couple of years ago someone asked me if I still thought about Vietnam. I nearly laughed in their face. How do you stop thinking about it? Every day I wake up with it and go to bed with it. But this is what I said. "Yeah, I think about it. I can't quit thinking about it. And I never will. But, I've also learned to live with it. I'm comfortable with the memories. I've learned to stop trying to forget, and learned instead to embrace them. Vietnam just doesn't scare me anymore."

A psychologist once told me that *not* being affected by the experience would be abnormal. When he said that, it was like he'd given me a pardon. It was as if he said, "Go ahead and feel something about the place, Bob. It isn't going anywhere. You're going to wear it for the rest of your life. Might as well get to know it."

A lot of my "brothers" haven't been so lucky. For them the memories are too painful, their sense of loss too great. My sister told me of a friend she has whose husband was in Vietnam. She asks this guy when he was there. Here's what he said, "Just last night." It took my sister a while to figure out what he was talking about. Just last night. Yeah I was in Vietnam. When? Just last night. And on my way to work this morning. Over my lunch hour. Playing with my kids. Yeah, I was there.

My sister says I'm not the same brother that went to Vietnam. My wife says I won't let people get close to me, not even her. They are probably both right. Ask a vet about making friends in Vietnam. It was risky. Why? Because we were in the business of death, and death was with us all the time. It wasn't the death of, "If I die before I wake." This was the real thing. The kind where boys scream for their mothers. The kind that lingers in your mind and becomes more real each time you cheat it. You don't want to make a lot of friends when the possibility of dying is that real, that close. When you do, friends become a liability.

A guy named Bob Flanigan was my friend. Bob Flanigan is dead. I put him in a body bag one sunny day, April 29, 1969. We'd been talking, only a few minutes before he was shot, about what we were going to do when we got back in the world. Now, this was a guy who had come in country the same time as myself. A guy who was loveable and generous. He had blue eyes and sandy blond hair. When he talked, it was with a soft drawl. Flanigan was a hick and he knew it. That was part of his charm. He didn't care. Man, I loved this guy like the brother I never had. But, I screwed up. I got too close to him. Maybe I didn't know any better. But I broke one of the unwritten rules of war. *Don't get close to people who are going to die.*

Sometimes you can't help it.

You hear vets use the term "buddy" when they refer to a guy they spent the war with. "Me and this buddy a mine." Friend sounds too intimate, doesn't it? Friend conjures up images of being close. If he's a friend, then you are going to be hurt if he dies, and war hurts enough without adding to the pain. Get close; get hurt. It's as simple as that.

In war you learn to keep people at that distance my wife talks about. You become so good at it, that for years after the war, you still do it without thinking. You won't allow yourself to be vulnerable again. My wife knows two people who can get into the soft spots inside me. My daughters. I know it probably bothers her that they can do this. It's not that I don't love my wife, I do. She's put up with a lot from me. She'll tell you that when she signed on for better or worse, she had no idea there was going to be so much of the latter. But with my daughters it's different. My girls are mine. They'll always be my kids. Not marriage, not distance, not even death can change that. They are something on this earth that can never be taken away from me. I belong to them. Nothing can change that. I can have an ex-wife; but my girls can never have an ex-father. There's the difference.

I can still see the faces, though they all seem to have the same eyes. When I think of us I always see a line of "dirty grunts" sitting on a paddy dike. We're caught in the first gray sliver between darkness and light. That first moment when we know we've survived another night, and the business of staying alive for one more day is about to begin. There was so much hope in that brief space of time. It's what we used to pray for. "One more day, Lord. One more day."

And I can hear our conversations as if they'd only just been spoken. I still hear the way we sounded, the hard cynical jokes, our morbid senses of humor. We were scared to death of dying, and trying our best not to show it. I recall the smells, too. Like the way cordite hangs on the air after a firefight. Or the pungent odor of rice paddy mud; so different from the black dirt of Iowa. The mud of Vietnam smelled ancient, somehow. Like it had always been there, waiting. And I'll never forget the way blood smells, sticky and drying on my hands. I spent a long night that way once. That memory isn't going anywhere.

I recall how the night jungle appears almost dream like as the pilot of a Cessna buzzes overhead, dropping parachute flares until morning. That artificial sun would flicker and make shadows run through the jungle. It was worse than not being able to see what was out there sometimes. I remember once looking at the man next to me as a flare floated overhead. The shadows around his eyes were so deep it looked like his eyes were missing. I reached over and touched him on the arm; without looking at me, he touched my hand. "I know man.

I know." That's what he said. It was a human moment. Two guys a long way from home and scared shitless. "I know man." And at that moment he did.

God I loved those guys. I hurt every time one of them died. We all did. Despite our posturing, despite our desire to stay disconnected, we couldn't help ourselves. I know why Tim O'Brien writes his stories. I know what gives Bruce Weigle the words to create poems so honest I cry at their horrible beauty. It's love. Love for those guys we shared the experience with. We did our jobs like good soldiers, and we tried our best not to become as hard as our surroundings. We touched each other and said, "I know." Like a mother holding a child in the middle of a nightmare, "It's going to be all right." We tried not to lose touch with our humanity. We tried to walk that fine line: To be the good boys our parents had raised and not to give into that unnamed thing we knew was inside us all.

You want to know what frightening is? It's a nineteen-year-old-boy who's had a sip of that power over life and death that war gives you. It's a boy who, despite all the things he's been taught, knows that he likes it. It's a nineteen-year-old who's just lost a friend, and is angry and scared and determined that, "Some son of a bitch is gonna pay." To this day, the thought of that boy can wake me from a sound sleep and leave me staring at the ceiling.

As I write this, I have a picture in front of me. It's of two young men. On their laps are tablets. One is smoking a cigarette. Both stare without expression at the camera. They're writing letters. Staying in touch with places they would rather be. Places and people they hope to see again. The picture shares space in a frame with one of my wife. She doesn't mind. She knows she's been included in special company. She knows I'll always love those guys who shared that part of my life, a part she never can. And she understands how I feel about my brothers who I know are out there, yet. The ones who still answer the question: When were you in Vietnam?

Me? I was there last night.

Mankato, Minnesota.  
2008.

# A Vietnam Veteran

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A Vietnam veteran, addicted to alcohol and marijuana, returns to the United States suffering from nightmares, flashbacks, a terrible temper and the fear he'll wind up killing someone. During his two years of duty, he'd dodged random rockets countless times as they landed all around him, and he'd watched his best friend get half his head blown off. Most of the men he'd been close to were either injured or killed. For most of his time in Vietnam, he'd stayed stoned on alcohol and marijuana laced with opium. He's come home with every kind of post-traumatic stress symptom, complicated by addiction.

Considering himself dangerous, untrustworthy and full of poison, he decides he's unfit to stay with his family. So he leaves home to hole up in a rat-infested, condemned building in New York City—no lights, no bed and no heat. He bootlegs electricity from the place next door and settles in with throwaway furniture he picks up from the street. For protection, he keeps by his side a butcher knife, taped to a broom handle and a chain studded with razors. These two handcrafted weapons establish his reputation as someone not to be messed with and help him fend off intruders who don't know any better. He feels he has demons inside of him that have to be exorcised — these impulses to hurt people need to be cleansed out of him somehow. His healing regimen is this: every day for sixteen hours a day, he plays John Coltrane on a record player he's found in the trash. Having once played tenor sax himself he finds something in this music that reaches him. John Coltrane is his mentor, idol and savior.

*"The music could touch the tender side of me . . . and the rage, too. It was like being cleansed. The music was so pure and lovely; but so edgy and real; it went right through my body. I started to see beauty again. As long as it was playing, all the garbage that had been dumped on me was no longer part of me. It was like a spiritual enlightenment. For a long time, the only thing I could stand to do was listen to that music, over and over again. Sixteen hours a day seven days a week. That was my healing. Other things came later—a very special woman and a job at a methadone clinic. But it was the music that purged me, delivered me back to my true self. It drove the demons out and restored my humanity. Dr. Coltrane found me and brought me back."*

From the book: "Invisible Heroes"

# How to Do Progressive Muscle Relaxation

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Progressive Muscle Relaxation teaches you how to relax your muscles through a two-step process. First, you systematically tense particular muscle groups in your body, such as your neck and shoulders. Next, you release the tension and notice how your muscles feel when you relax them. This exercise will help you to lower your overall tension and stress levels, and help you relax when you are feeling anxious. It can also help reduce physical problems such as stomachaches and headaches, as well as improve your sleep.

People with anxiety difficulties are often so tense throughout the day that they don't even recognize what being relaxed feels like. Through practice you can learn to distinguish between the feelings of a tensed muscle and a completely relaxed muscle. Then, you can begin to "cue" this relaxed state at the first sign of the muscle tension that accompanies your feelings of anxiety. By tensing and releasing, you learn not only what relaxation feels like, but also to recognize when you are starting to get tense during the day.

## Helpful Hints:

- Set aside about 15 minutes to complete this exercise.
- Find a place where you can complete this exercise without being disturbed.
- For the first week or two, practice this exercise twice a day until you get the hang of it. The better you become at it, the quicker the relaxation response will "kick in" when you really need it!

You do not need to be feeling anxious when you practice this exercise. In fact, it is better to first practice it when you are calm. That way, it will be easier to do when feeling anxious.

## Getting ready

Find a quiet, comfortable place to sit, then close your eyes and let your body go loose. A reclining armchair is ideal. You can lie down, but this will increase your chances of falling asleep. Although relaxing before bed can improve your sleep, the goal of this exercise is to learn to relax while awake. Wear loose, comfortable clothing, and don't forget to remove your shoes. Take about five slow, deep breaths before you begin.

## How to Do It - *The Tension – Relaxation Response*

### Step One: Tension

The first step is applying muscle tension to a specific part of the body. This step is essentially the same regardless of which muscle group you are targeting.

1. *Focus on the target muscle group, for example, your left hand.*
2. *Take a slow, deep breath and squeeze the muscles as hard as you can for about 5 seconds.* It is important to *really feel* the tension in the muscles, which may even cause a bit of discomfort or shaking. In this instance, you would be making a tight fist with your left hand.

It is easy to accidentally tense other surrounding muscles (for example, the shoulder or arm), so try to **ONLY** tense the muscles you are targeting. Isolating muscle groups gets easier with practice. **Be Careful!** Take care not to hurt yourself while tensing your muscles. You should never feel intense or shooting pain while completing this exercise.

Make the muscle tension deliberate, yet gentle. If you have problems with pulled muscles, broken ones, or any medical issues that would hinder physical activity, consult your doctor first.

## Step Two: Relaxing the Tense Muscles

This step involves quickly relaxing the tensed muscles.

1. After about 5 seconds, let all the tightness flow out of the tensed muscles. Exhale as you do this step. You should feel the muscles become loose and limp, as the tension flows out. **It is important to very deliberately focus on and notice the difference between the tension and relaxation. This is the most important part of the whole exercise.**
2. Remain in this relaxed state for about 15 seconds, and then move on to the next muscle group.

Repeat the tension-relaxation steps. After completing all of the muscle groups, take some time to enjoy the deep state of relaxation.

**Note:** It can take time to learn to relax the body and notice the difference between tension and relaxation. At first, it can feel uncomfortable to be focusing on your body, but this can become quite enjoyable over time.

## The Different Muscle Groups

During this exercise, you will be working with almost all the major muscle groups in your body. To make it easier to remember, start with your feet and systematically move up (or if you prefer, you can do it in the reverse order, from your forehead down to your feet).

For example:

- **Foot** (curl your toes downward)
- **Lower leg and foot** (tighten your calf muscle by pulling toes towards you)
- **Entire leg** (squeeze thigh muscles while doing above)  
*(Repeat on other side of body)*
- **Hand** (clench your fist)
- **Entire right arm** (tighten your biceps by drawing your forearm up towards your shoulder and “make a muscle”, while clenching fist)  
*(Repeat on other side of body)*
- **Buttocks** (tighten by pulling your buttocks together)
- **Stomach** (suck your stomach in)
- **Chest** (tighten by taking a deep breath)

- **Neck and shoulders** (raise your shoulders up to touch your ears)
- **Mouth** (open your mouth wide enough to stretch the hinges of your jaw)
- **Eyes** (clench your eyelids tightly shut)
- **Forehead** (raise your eyebrows as far as you can)

It can be helpful to listen to someone guide you through these steps. There are many relaxation CDs for sale that will take you through a progressive muscle relaxation (or something very similar). Alternatively, you can record a script of this process on a tape or CD, or ask a friend or relative with a calm, soothing voice to record it for you. It would sound something like this:

*“Take a deep breath in through your nose...hold your breath for a few seconds...and now breathe out...take another deep breath through your nose... Now pay attention to your body and how it feels.... Start with your **right foot**... squeeze all the muscles in your right foot. Curl your toes as tight as you can, now hold it....hold it...good...now relax and exhale...let your foot go limp...notice the difference between the tension and relaxation....feel the tension flow out of your foot like water...(then repeat with **right lower leg and foot, entire right leg**, etc...)”*

## Quick Tense & Relax!

Once you have become familiar with the “tension and relaxation” technique, and have been practicing it for a couple weeks, you can begin to practice a very short version of progressive muscle relaxation. In this approach, you learn how to tense larger groups of muscles, which takes even less time. These muscle groups are:

1. **Lower limbs** (feet and legs)
2. **Stomach and chest**
3. **Arms, shoulders, and neck**
4. **Face**

So instead of working with just one specific muscle group at a time (e.g., your stomach), you can focus on the complete group (your stomach AND chest). You can start by focusing on your breathing during the tension and relaxation. When doing this shortened version, it can be helpful to say a certain word or phrase to yourself as you slowly exhale (such as “*relax*”, “*let go*”, “*stay calm*”, “*peace*” “*it will pass*” etc...). This word or phrase will become associated with a relaxed state; eventually, saying this word alone can bring on a calm feeling. This can be handy during times when it would be hard to take the time to go through all the steps of progressive muscle relaxation.

## Release Only

A good way to even further shorten the time you take to relax your muscles is to become familiar with the “release only” technique. One of the benefits of tensing and releasing muscles is that you learn to recognize what tense muscles feel like and what relaxed muscles feel like.

Once you feel comfortable with the tension and relaxation techniques, you can start doing “release only”, which involves **removing** the “tension” part of the exercise. For example, instead of tensing your stomach and chest before relaxing them, try just relaxing the muscles. At first, the feeling of relaxation might feel less intense than when you tensed the muscles beforehand, but with practice, the release-only technique can be just as relaxing.

**Final Note:** *Remember to practice progressive muscle relaxation often, whether you are feeling anxious or not. This will make the exercise even more effective when you really do need to relax! Though it may feel a bit tedious at first, ultimately you will gain a skill that will probably become a very important part of managing your anxiety in your daily life.*



# Restful Insomnia

*How to Get the Benefits of Sleep Even When You Can't  
(excerpt)*

## Reframing and Using Insomnia

Insomnia wins or you win. That's how most insomniacs view the nights: a lonely battle with sleeplessness, the diabolical enemy. You can gather combat forces, but it's hard to outwit insomnia. You need a modern John Wayne who strides into your bedroom and proclaims: *"Insomnia, this bed ain't big enough for both of us, so get outta here by sundown."*

*OK, so that only works in the movies.*

But there is a hero in real life – you. You can rescue yourself, if not for the sleep poacher, at least from suffering with it. It starts with reframing—changing how you view insomnia.

**Reframing means looking at something from a new perspective.** You do it all the time. When you look at the famous optical illusion and see a vase, then two profiles, you've changed how you're seeing the picture. When you flinch at a bug and then find that it's a piece of lint, you've changed how you're looking at your environment. When you groan over your dog's failed house-training only to learn that your roommate spilled lemonade, you're putting a new frame around what's exactly there, and it becomes a different experience.

Once when I explained Restful Insomnia to a new acquaintance, she replied in a soft drawl, *"Isn't insomnia great? I just love that time of night. In fact, when I sleep right through the night, I miss it."*

All of you, who agree with her, please raise your hands. Hmm...I see four of you with hands partway up. The rest of you million readers (a little positive image for the author here) spend sleepless nights being worried, grumpy, and wanting to sleep already. That was me last night....Then I remembered Restful Insomnia. I didn't have to be this grumpy; I could change what I told myself. My mantra became, *"It's OK to just rest...put on the eye mask and roll your eyes down...breathe..."* And indeed, Restful Insomnia worked—once I let it. I became rested, so it didn't matter if I slept (and I did).

Although I've had several years of practice reframing insomnia, you can make a difference in your view of wakefulness in just one night.

# Three Breathing Exercises

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*"Practicing regular, mindful breathing can be calming and energizing and can even help with stress-related health problems ranging from panic attacks to digestive disorders." Andrew Weil, M.D.*

Since breathing is something we can control and regulate, it is a useful tool for achieving a relaxed and clear state of mind. I recommend three breathing exercises to help relax and reduce stress: The Stimulating Breath, The 4-7-8 Breathing Exercise (also called the Relaxing Breath), and Breath Counting. Try each and see how they affect your stress and anxiety levels.

## **Exercise 1: The Stimulating Breath (also called the Bellows Breath)**

The Stimulating Breath is adapted from a yogic breathing technique. Its aim is to raise vital energy and increase alertness.

Inhale and exhale rapidly through your nose, keeping your mouth closed but relaxed. Your breaths in and out should be equal in duration, but as short as possible. This is a noisy breathing exercise.

Try for three in-and-out breath cycles per second. This produces a quick movement of the diaphragm, suggesting a bellows. Breathe normally after each cycle.

Do not do for more than 15 seconds on your first try. Each time you practice the Stimulating Breath, you can increase your time by five seconds or so, until you reach a full minute.

If done properly, you may feel invigorated, comparable to the heightened awareness you feel after a good workout. You should feel the effort at the back of the neck, the diaphragm, the chest and the abdomen. Try this breathing exercise the next time you need an energy boost and feel yourself reaching for a cup of coffee.

## **Exercise 2: The 4-7-8 (or Relaxing Breath) Exercise**

This exercise is utterly simple, takes almost no time, requires no equipment and can be done anywhere. Although you can do the exercise in any position, sit with your back straight while learning the exercise. Place the tip of your tongue against the ridge of tissue just behind your upper front teeth, and keep it there through the entire exercise. You will be exhaling through your mouth around your tongue; try pursing your lips slightly if this seems awkward.

- 1. Exhale completely through your mouth, making a whoosh sound.**
- 2. Close your mouth and inhale quietly through your nose to a mental count of four.**
- 3. Hold your breath for a count of seven.**
- 4. Exhale completely through your mouth, making a whoosh sound to a count of eight.**
- 5. This is one breath. Now inhale again and repeat the cycle three more times for a total of four breaths.**

Note that you always inhale quietly through your nose and exhale audibly through your mouth. The tip of your tongue stays in position the whole time. Exhalation takes twice as long as inhalation. The absolute time you spend on each phase is not important; **the ratio of 4:7:8 is important**. If you have trouble holding your breath, speed the exercise up but keep to the ratio of 4:7:8 for the three phases. With practice you can slow it all down and get used to inhaling and exhaling more and more deeply.

This exercise is a natural tranquilizer for the nervous system. Unlike tranquilizing drugs, which are often effective when you first take them but then lose their power over time, this exercise is subtle when you first try it but gains in power with repetition and practice. Do it at least twice a day. You cannot do it too frequently. Do not do more than four breaths at one time for the first month of practice. Later, if you wish, you can extend it to eight breaths. If you feel a little lightheaded when you first breathe this way, do not be concerned; it will pass.

Once you develop this technique by practicing it every day, it will be a very useful tool that you will always have with you. Use it whenever anything upsetting happens - before you react. Use it whenever you are aware of internal tension. Use it to help you fall asleep. This exercise cannot be recommended too highly. Everyone can benefit from it.

### **Exercise 3: Breath Counting**

If you want to get a feel for this challenging work, try your hand at breath counting, a deceptively simple technique much used in Zen practice.

Sit in a comfortable position with the spine straight and head inclined slightly forward. Gently close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. Then let the breath come naturally without trying to influence it. Ideally it will be quiet and slow, but depth and rhythm may vary.

1. To begin the exercise, count "one" to yourself as you exhale.
2. The next time you exhale, count "two," and so on up to "five."
3. Then begin a new cycle, counting "one" on the next exhalation.

Never count higher than "five," and count only when you exhale. You will know your attention has wandered when you find yourself up to "eight," "12," even "19."

**Try to do 10 minutes of this form of meditation.**