

Alleviating Migraines and Other Chronic Pain:

The Art of Deep Relaxation

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Many people who suffer chronic headaches are likely unaware of residual tension in their bodies, for it may be a long time since they've relaxed. Yet tension exacerbates a migraine, adding to its severity and instigating many non-headache symptoms. That's why relaxation can be key to getting the upper hand on the illness. If you can picture your body as a raisin, the idea is to return it to its previous state as a grape.

Stress relief techniques can help shorten the duration, intensity and frequency of migraines. Meanwhile, nausea, chills and chest tightness can be eradicated altogether by practicing some simple, non-taxing exercises for even a short interval daily.

Unlike aerobics, stretching, yoga and other familiar workout regimens, relaxation techniques reach a lot of unused parts of your anatomy that may be storing a lot of tension. The jaw and the muscles surrounding your eyes amount to the prime suspects when it comes to headaches. Luckily, stress relief techniques are easy to learn and don't require a mastery of meditation, a personal trainer or even a lot of stamina. In fact, you can lie down on your back and do them.

First released by the Oakland based New Harbinger Publications way back in 1980, *The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook* comprises a veritable Fort Knox of exercises that release tension fast and without much effort. An original press run of 1,000 multiplied over the next decade to nearly a quarter million copies sold throughout North America. Its three authors are Martha Davis and Elizabeth Robbins Eshelman, health professionals at Kaiser Permanente; and Matthew McKay, founder and director of Haight Ashbury Psychological Services.

One of the most helpful techniques described in the book is called Progressive Relaxation, which was actually first introduced in the United States in 1929. Here it is in a nutshell:

Lie down and take some deep breaths. Then divide your body up into several sections, for example calves and feet; thighs; buttocks and lower back; chest and stomach; head, face, throat and shoulders. Moving up from your feet to your head, tense up each section for 5-7 seconds, then release (When you first try this exercise, get acquainted with all the moving parts in each section first. To do this, gently flex or turn the different muscles and joints. You'll be surprised at how much gadgetry your body comes equipped with, especially above the neck.)

While it's tempting to skip the chapter on breathing exercises, if you suffer from headaches you might try a few of these, since any form of chronic pain generally affects your ability to breathe deeply. Breathing serves the essential function of removing waste products from the blood at the same time that oxygen is being deposited. "Poorly oxygenated blood contributes to anxiety states, depression and fatigue," the authors explain, "and makes each stressful situation many times harder to cope with," according to the authors.

Another seemingly innocuous exercise in the book instructs you to bend down and touch the floor. This can turn out to be something of a revelation. In the process of bending over, you realize that muscles in different sections of your body are more closely connected to each other than western medicine likes to admit.

Asian medical theory suggests that headaches have their source in the liver. Heat rises to your head through *meridians*, followed by more than a normal amount of blood flow. That's why bending over can help ward off an oncoming headache. You might try working in your garden or bending down to give your dog a massage for a few minutes. This reverses the pressure of gravity also contributes to the raisin-back-to-grape effort. Any blockages of energy or circulation can be opened up by bending over as well.

The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook goes on to describe many other alternative health disciplines, including hypnotherapy, visualization, and autogenics, the training technique used in conjunction with biofeedback.

To understand what causes a body to stress out in the first place, the book examines the "fight or flight" response, a basic human instinct. The hypothalamus gland (located in the center of the brain) sets the autonomic nervous system into action whenever a person becomes frightened or feels attacked emotionally. Not only physical danger, but also instances of aggravation, humiliation, and frustration have the ability to flip this self-preservation trigger. Your jaw locks and your adrenal glands secrete corticoids, including adrenalin, which inhibit your digestive system.

While fight or flight serves the essential purpose of stimulating the body to lash out forcefully against an opponent, in cases where such expressive behavior may be inappropriate, not reacting once the hormones have kicked in can tax the body in unhappy ways. Moreover, some people are unable to turn the flight or fight faucet off once the danger passes. For that reason, it's important to learn how to detect and address this potent physiological response in order to conserve the body's energy and limit the strain on the nervous system. You may have noticed on occasions when you have reacted forcefully and with anger that a period of deep relaxation will follow. By learning what the book calls "the relaxation response", you can learn to re-program the body to not get so twisted and taut in the course of a normal. It's easier said than done, but by incorporating progressive relaxation, breathing exercises, bending and other techniques, the goal of lessening, then eliminating migraines and other chronic pain is well within reach.

While *The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook* is no longer in print, you may be able to find it at a public library. To purchase a used copy online, go to www.allbookstores.com.

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