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MASTER THE MOMENT

Want to feel less tense, wherever you are? You can use these six scientifically proven techniques to rewire the body's stress response

By Hallie Levine

YOU'VE PROBABLY ALREADY USED MINDFULNESS IN some form, whether it's taking a moment to calm yourself in that long Costco line or touching your heart as you say "Namaste" at the end of yoga class. That's a good call: mindfulness—the act of being aware of what you're sensing and feeling so that you can become less consumed by negative thoughts and worries—has clear health benefits. "It can reduce stress and improve symptoms of anxiety and depression, because it really forces you to focus on where you are at the present moment," explains Alice Domar, the executive director of the Domar Center for Mind/Body Health and the director of mind/body services at Boston IVF in Boston. But like everything else in this fast-paced world, research on what techniques work best changes constantly. Here, the latest thinking on the six must-haves for your tool kit.

Mindful breathing

DIFFICULTY: Easiest

WHAT IT IS: Exactly what it sounds like—putting all your attention into your breath. "It's a very helpful technique, especially for beginners, because it gives them something specific to focus on—their breathing—when their mind starts to wander," explains Sharon Salzberg, co-founder of the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Mass., and author of *Real Love*. It's also a way to stay present in the moment rather than get distracted by worries or negative emotions.

RESEARCH BEHIND IT: Deep breathing helps reduce stress and anxiety. A 2016 study published in the journal *PLoS One*, for example, found that practicing daily mindful breathing reduced test anxiety in college stu-



dents. A Stanford study published in the journal *Science* in 2017 stumbled upon the reason this technique may be so effective: deep breathing appears to deactivate a handful of brain nerve cells that trigger anxiety. **HOW TO GET STARTED:** Close your eyes and take a deep breath in through your nose, feeling your lungs fill up, advises Mallika Chopra, founder of wellness website Intentblog.com and author of *Just Breathe: Meditation, Mindfulness, Movement, and*

More. Hold for a second and then breathe out slowly through your mouth. On your next breath, breathe in for three seconds, pause for two seconds and then breathe out for four seconds. “If your mind wanders, that’s OK—just try to bring your attention back to your breath,” advises Chopra. Try doing it for a minute; over time build up to five or 10.

NEXT-LEVEL ZEN: Zero in on a specific sensation, suggests Salzberg: for example, the coolness of the



The cool-down portion of your regular exercise class is the perfect time to do a quick body scan and make sure you aren't tensing up any muscles.

air as you inhale through your nose and the warmth of it as you exhale through your mouth. Or visualize yourself breathing in peace and calm and exhaling tension and anxiety out.

Meditation


DIFFICULTY: Easy to moderate

WHAT IT IS: The goal of meditation, a practice thousands of years old, “is to develop your focus and concentration, as well as promote compassion,” says Salzberg. While there are many different forms out there—walking meditations, compassion meditations, loving-kindness meditations—they all require relaxed breathing and your focused attention to help push away jumbled thoughts that may be leaving you distracted and stressed, Salzberg adds.

RESEARCH BEHIND IT: Studies show meditation can lower blood pressure, improve symptoms of ir-

ritable bowel syndrome and reduce anxiety, depression and insomnia, according to the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health. In fact, just one hour of meditation appears to lower anxiety, heart rate and blood pressure, according to a Michigan Technological University study presented in April 2018 at the annual Experimental Biology meeting. Another study, published in March 2018 in the *Journal of Cognitive Enhancement*, followed regular meditators for seven years and found that they showed less cognitive decline than those who meditated less frequently.

HOW TO GET STARTED: Sit in a comfortable chair in a quiet spot. Breathe as you normally would, in and out of your nose. Your eyes can be open or closed. Now pick a mantra. It can be as simple as “peace” or “shalom” or “the Lord is my shepherd,” says Domar. It can be either religious or secular, as long



as it relaxes you. Repeat it with each inhale and with each exhale. If your mind wanders, don't stress—simply return the focus to chanting the word and to your breathing. "It's common for your mind to drift off to something else—it's impossible to keep your thoughts or sleepiness or anxiety at bay," reassures Salzberg. Initially, you may be able to meditate for only five minutes. You can build it up to 10, 20, even 30 minutes with practice. But it's still useful even if you have only a sliver of time. "Three minutes of meditating while waiting in the carpool line is great—you'll still get benefits," says Chopra.

NEXT-LEVEL ZEN: If you've been trying to sit and quiet your mind and you're really not feeling it, try a walking meditation. "You can do it anywhere, even on a busy city sidewalk," says Salzberg. Slow down your walking pace enough that you can concentrate on your legs and feet: "You really want to feel your leg moving forward, putting your foot down and shifting weight to your other side as you move your other leg forward," she explains.

Body scan . . .

DIFFICULTY: Moderate

WHAT IT IS: Focusing your attention on different parts of your body, from head to toe, starting with your forehead and extending to the muscles in your feet. "It's a chance to notice and address tension that you may have been completely unaware of, like clenched teeth or hunched-over shoulders," says Domar.

RESEARCH BEHIND IT: People who practice body scan report improvements in their mental well-being, according to research. Combat veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder, for example, who performed it for 20 minutes each day at home for six weeks noticed improvements in symptoms, according to a 2016 Oregon Health & Science University study. Another study, of women ages 18 to 46, found that those who practiced body scan four days a week for three weeks had less stress and felt happier than a control group.

HOW TO GET STARTED: Although a body scan is often done lying down, you can also do it sitting or standing—really, any position that makes you feel comfortable. "Take a few slow deep breaths, focusing on your forehead," says Domar. "Ask yourself: Is there any muscle tension as I exhale? Can I relax my forehead muscles? Then move down to your eyes. Are they squeezed too tight? Continue this process,

stopping at your cheeks, lower jaw, neck, shoulders, until you've gone all the way down your body." Initially, you may be able to do this for only five or 10 minutes, but as your concentration increases, you can move it up to 20 or 30 minutes or longer. Anytime your mind drifts, bring it back to the body part you were focusing on.

NEXT-LEVEL ZEN: Throw a blanket over your body. "It not only makes you feel more comfortable, which relaxes you, it also forces you to become aware of the sensation of the fabric on whatever body part you're focusing on," says yoga guru Tiffany Cruikshank, author of *Meditate Your Weight: A 21-Day Retreat to Optimize Your Metabolism and Feel Great*.

. . . and progressive muscle relaxation

DIFFICULTY: Moderate

WHAT IT IS: This relaxation exercise is similar to body scan, but instead of passively observing, you deliberately tighten each muscle group for a count of five and then relax it, explains Domar. "It really forces you to become aware of the contrast between tension and relaxation." It's great for people whose minds tend to wander, since you're so attuned to tightening and relaxing muscles that you stay focused.

RESEARCH BEHIND IT: Progressive muscle relaxation has a track record for easing stress and anxiety, but it's also proving useful in combating insomnia. One study published in the *Journal of Clinical Nursing* found that it improved sleep quality and reduced overall fatigue in women undergoing chemo for breast cancer.

HOW TO GET STARTED: You can do it either sitting up or lying down, but wear loose clothing so you don't have anything constricting your muscles. Start with the lower body and work your way up, advises Gail Gross, a psychologist in Houston and the author of *The Only Way Out Is Through*. Focus on your toes, flexing them for five to 10 seconds, and then quickly release. "I often tell patients to first chant 'squeeze, squeeze, squeeze, then release,' until their mind takes over and they start doing it instinctively," says Gross. Repeat this several times and then work your way up to another muscle group. The key here is to aim for the quick release of muscles, which helps drain tension from your body, says Gross.

NEXT-LEVEL ZEN: As you're going about your day, see if you can naturally recognize when a muscle is tensing up in stressful situations, and then release it.

Visualization

DIFFICULTY: Moderate

WHAT IT IS: In this mindfulness technique, you create a mental picture to take a sensory journey to a peaceful, calming place or situation, says Gross. Use as many senses as you can, particularly smell, sight, sound and touch. “If you’re visualizing a brook, for example, picture the sound of the water, the sight of an open field of green grass next to it, and feel the water pressing against your hand as you dip it into the stream,” says Gross.

RESEARCH BEHIND IT: Eighty percent of hospitalized patients who listened to a 30-minute guided imagery recording reported that it helped them by relieving pain, anxiety or insomnia, according to a study conducted at William Beaumont Hospital in Michigan and published in 2017 in *Critical Care Nurse*. Other research has found that it helps lower blood pressure in pregnant women.

HOW TO GET STARTED: After finding a quiet, comfortable place where you won’t be disturbed, close your eyes, take a couple of deep breaths and imagine yourself in one of your favorite places, whether it’s lying on a beach, floating in a pool or hiking on a trail. Create mental images using all five senses—hear, see, smell, taste and feel. After several minutes, take a few deep breaths and open your eyes. “It takes some practice, so don’t get discouraged if you don’t

get the hang of it the first time around,” says Domar.

NEXT-LEVEL ZEN: Creative visualization can help you tackle anxiety and achieve a goal, says Gross. Almost as if you’re watching a movie, picture yourself carrying out all the steps needed to reach the desired result (for example, winning a tennis match).

Autogenic training

DIFFICULTY: Hardest

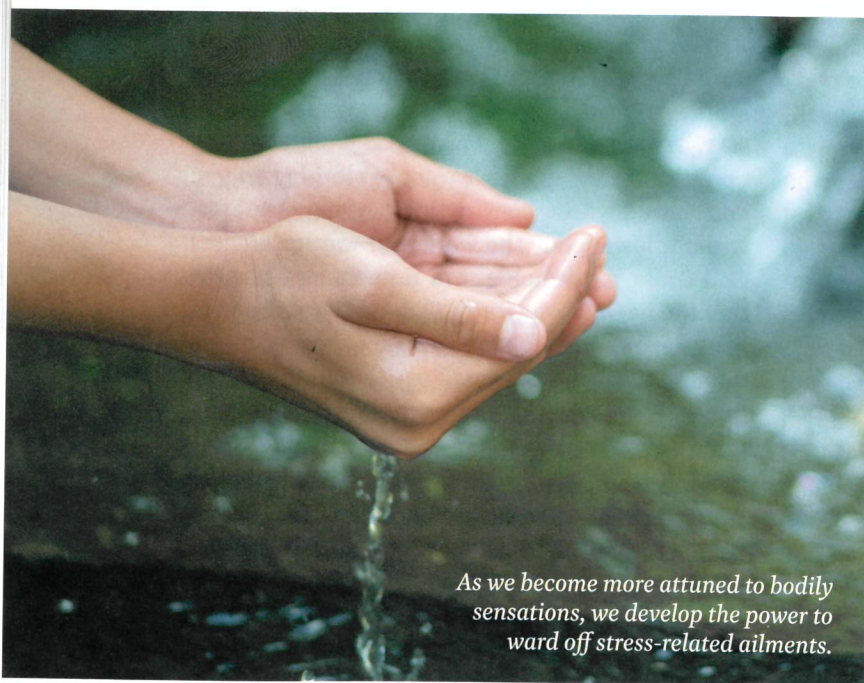
WHAT IT IS: You use both visualization and body awareness to help achieve control of your autonomic nervous system, which is responsible for involuntary body functions such as your heart rate, breathing and digestion. It involves silently repeating a specific “script” to help you imagine, for example, that your limbs are warm and heavy and your heart rate and breathing are slow and steady. This in turn helps relax your whole body. “I often find that people who failed to use other types end up succeeding with autogenic training, since it keeps their mind so occupied,” says Domar.

RESEARCH BEHIND IT: One landmark meta-analysis of 35 studies concluded it was an effective treatment for many different conditions, including tension headaches, migraines, mild hypertension, anxiety disorders, mild to moderate depression and functional sleep disorders. The most recent studies show it can help reduce stress and anxiety. And it also has

some surprising uses: just one session appears to increase sexual arousal in premenopausal women who have low desire, according to a 2018 University of Texas study published in the *Journal of Sex Therapy*.

HOW TO GET STARTED: You’ll need lessons (offered at some universities) to learn six techniques, designed to stimulate a sense of heaviness in the musculoskeletal system and a feeling of warmth in the circulatory system. Therapists direct your attention to your heartbeat, breath, hand temperature and other bodily sensations. You’ll be given verbal cues (for example: “My heart is beating calmly and steadily . . .”).

NEXT-LEVEL ZEN: Sometimes, people don’t respond to a therapist’s voice, Domar says, so they’ll record a session with their own voice to use at home. ■



As we become more attuned to bodily sensations, we develop the power to ward off stress-related ailments.