

Twelve Terrific Techniques for Tackling Tension

by Thomas Warney

Everyone seems tense these days. Really tense. At home (“Who ate the last chocolate chip cookie?!?!”). On the highway (“You bling-blang fada-yada moron! Who gave you a licence?!?”). And at the office (“All right, now. Somebody left these dirty cups in the sink, and we’re not leaving til I find out who!!”).

This can’t be good. Tight faces, tight chests, shallow breathing, pounding hearts, acid indigestion, aching muscles, strained eyes, headaches, the urge to eat chocolate-covered french fries.... Not good at all.

Physically, mentally and spiritually, it seems that we are shortchanging ourselves. We deserve better.

Now, what if there were some fast, easy ways to make this sad situation at least a little better? Some “quick tricks” to help us be more ourselves, be more at ease, be more satisfied and even, dare we say it, happy?

Here are a few fun experiments to try out. Some you may already have heard about, some may be new, and some may seem a little bizarre. Pick the ones that appeal to you, and see what happens. You’ll know when you get the results you want.

* “Memories”: Here’s a method that’s very effective for relaxing, and which also gives you a perfectly valid reason for daydreaming. Simply sit back, close your eyes, and recall a wonderful, peaceful experience that you have had — either recently, a while back, or even in childhood. When you remember powerfully, especially when you remember as though you’re seeing, feeling, hearing, tasting, smelling what you did then, your body begins to respond as if you’re actually there. Aaahhh. Nice, eh? You can do this any time for a few wonderful moments that will refresh you.

* “Smile”: Yep. That’s all there is to it. Go ahead, and notice what all the happiness researchers tell us: when you smile, you feel better. No, no — not a grimace. Sure, you have to force it a bit, but that’s the idea. When you smile, you set in motion a remembered chain of events that resulted in your feeling good. You can do this any time, too. It also affects those around you in a very mysterious way.

* "Breathe": Sure, you're breathing. But is it fun? Tension results in hunched shoulders, a constricted ribcage, pressure and shallow breathing from the top of the lungs. To reverse the process and get your full complement of good old oxygen, try breathing abdominally, by stretching out your lower abdomen, allowing air to be "sucked in" at the top. Then just exhale naturally. Athletes, dancers, singers and actors all use abdominal breathing to keep them relaxed and energetic, and also to add power to their voices and movements. "Sighing" feels good and helps us relax because it's the body's way of reminding us to relax and breathe deeply.

* "Stand up for Yourself": We're talking posture, here. It's pretty hard to feel good about yourself or anything at all if you're slouched over, head down, studying your feet. Go ahead, try it. Now stand straight, look up, and raise your arms up over your head. Feel better already? Add the smiling and breathing, and you're suddenly feeling pretty darn good.

* "Stretch It": The previous exercise had the additional benefit of allowing you to stretch, and stretching is one of the most powerful relaxation and stress-balancing methods around. We all do it naturally. Sometimes, though, we forget, so give yourself permission to stretch, fully and luxuriously, as often as you need to. It helps your body to get rid of toxins and promotes the best use of the oxygen you're breathing.

* "Enjoy a Free Massage": Related to stretching, massage helps to get the circulation going, relax the muscles and balance out the whole body system. You can massage yourself, or make a deal with a partner. Pay special attention to the neck, shoulders and lower back, and to the fingers, hands and wrists. One great way to get a "full massage" in a few moments is to massage the bottoms of your feet. In Reflexology theory, all the organs and systems of your body are represented in the feet, and massaging them does wonders for the whole physical self. It certainly feels good!

* "Tense-Release": This involves a little detective work. Check your body to find the areas that are holding tension. Then, tense them even more. And then, let them relax, fully. Do this a few times with each of the major tension areas. The rest of the body will start to catch on and soon the whole system will be relaxed.

* "Laugh and the World Laughs": This is less than easy when you really don't feel that there's anything at all to laugh about. But give it a chance. You may have to "jump start" yourself at first, but it'll be fine when you get going. You can just start by going "ha! ha! ha!" deep down in your lower abdomen, while doing your best to smile. Or you can keep a secret cartoon file, of "Dilbert" or your own favorites, to look at when you want to laugh. Laughing releases tension, promotes good breathing and circulation, and puts things in a less serious perspective. Once others get used to you laughing, they may try it too.

* "Switcheroo": Speaking of perspective, have you ever thought about when someone made you feel kind of crummy? How big are they in your memory? How big are you? If you're real small, and they're real big, why not change it around? YOU be the big shot, and let the other person, preferably in their underwear or in a silly costume, be as small as you make them — even small enough to have to look up to see the toe of your shoe! After you've had your revenge (I'll leave that to your obviously vivid imagination), let both of you return to regular human being size. How have your feelings changed?

* "Time Travel": This is a good method for dealing with guilt or anxiety. "Guilt" is being troubled by something that happened that you weren't pleased with, and "anxiety" is being troubled by something that hasn't happened yet, but that you fear you may not be pleased with. Start with guilt. Settle back, relax yourself, and think about the guilt-event. Now, imagine that you are traveling back in time, until you get to the event in question. Go just a bit further until you are just five minutes before the event took place. Where is the guilt now? (Hint: you can't feel guilty about something that "hasn't happened yet.") And as you look "ahead" to the event, can you think of some alternate courses of action you might take in future events of this type? Let yourself review the choices and remember them as you come back to the present moment.

With anxiety, you can do the same thing by going into the "future" until just five minutes past the successful completion of the event that had you worried. Look "back" to see yourself having done well. (Again, you can't have anxiety about something that's already over and done with.) And as you look at yourself, you can know how you did well, and remember those good things as you return to the present moment.

* "Way Out": We've all heard the saying, "How important will this seem twenty years from now?" Instead of just replying, "Oh, yeah," or "Go soak your head," we can actually try this out. Actually imagine yourself going ahead in years, getting older, changing things in your life, doing new things, being with new people, accomplishing good things. Go ahead a year, five years, ten years, or more. And then, as you stand there in the future, try to recall the importance of that event that made you uncomfortable so "long ago."

Or, try looking at the event from the point of view of the other person involved. And I don't just mean superficially: actually "become" the other person in your imagination and think, feel, perceive as they might. And then, try seeing the whole event or interaction from the viewpoint of an impartial observer — a stranger, or a "fly on the wall", or an "alien" from another planet. What new perspectives and ideas develop? Does this give you some good ideas about how to handle similar situations in the future?

* "Be in Love": Really. Research has proven that being in love is one of the best ways to relax, enjoy living, and be healthy (actually boosting your immune system amazingly). Now, before this gets out of hand, let me note that you don't actually have to start chasing someone around the office, here. We've all been in love, and we all know how it feels. We can imagine being in love (think romance, think warm, close relationships, think hobbies or activities you're passionate about, think puppies, think flowers...), and we can spread this feeling around to our environment. Love helps us get "out of ourselves" so we start doing more for others. And doing for others is a great way to find satisfaction in our lives. Now, this does not mean necessarily becoming like Mother Teresa. And it certainly does not mean denying our own needs for the sake of what we "should" do (there's enough of that around already). It simply means being a little less self-preoccupied, and aware that we are not alone. We are part of an interacting, living system that needs us as much as we need it.

Well, there are the twelve — and of course you can find or invent a lot more. The main foundation for all of these is simply, "Be aware of myself" and "Take good care of myself", understanding that this means more than just my small idea of myself. "Self" is body, mind, and spirit, and it includes our connections with our environment and others. As we relax and live more fully and with more enjoyment and satisfaction, our world starts to respond and restructure itself accordingly. It's your world — relax and enjoy it!

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