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fact sheet

RELAXATION TECHNIQUES AND MINDFULNESS PRACTICES: COPING WITH CANCER

Cancer and its treatment can be stressful for people with cancer and their caregivers. Relaxation techniques and other mind/body practices can help calm your mind and sharpen your ability to focus. These techniques offer creative ways to reduce stress caused by cancer and maintain inner peace. For example, some people use these techniques to help them relax as they wait for treatments or test results.

TECHNIQUES THAT CAN HELP INCREASE YOUR MINDFULNESS

Breathing Exercises

At the core of life is breath. Laughing, crying, yawning and sighing are the body's natural ways of reconnecting us with our breath. That is why we sometimes feel calmer or rejuvenated after these experiences. Anxiety and stress cause us take shorter, shallower breaths which can then make us feel even more anxious.

Try this simple breathing exercise:

1. Take a breath and feel your belly expand.
2. Hold the breath for a few seconds, or however long is comfortable for you, and then exhale slowly.
3. Repeat steps 1 and 2, slowly.
4. Relax for a moment and explore the experience of feeling calm.

With this technique, the mind relaxes through continued focus on your breath. As your mind creates noise, practice non-judgmental awareness—simply observe your thoughts without deciding whether they are good or bad. You may notice that your thinking has brought you either far into the future or back into the past. This is normal.

Gently guide your attention back to the present and focus on your inhales and exhales again. Be centered only in the moment. This can be practiced both while seated quietly or while active.

Meditation

Repetitive prayers are a traditional form of meditation. Other forms of meditation include mantra meditation. Mantra meditation focuses the mind on a word or sound, also called a mantra. Many people create their own mantra from a comforting word, such as "peace," "love" or "now." The goal is to relax the mind, which has a natural tendency to jump from one idea—and from one worry—to the next. There is no need to force your mind back to your mantra when you notice it has wandered. Instead, gently remember your mantra and accept that the mind will stray again. Know that closed eyes are not a requirement for meditation practice. Many people prefer to keep their eyes open with their gaze relaxed.

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Guided Imagery

This stress-reduction technique combines breathing and meditation. As you practice your breathing, imagine a peaceful scene or setting that brings you joy. Sometimes, just listening to ambient sounds is enough to relax your mind and briefly transport you to a place in which you might feel safer and more secure.

FINDING ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Other mind/body practices include yoga, tai chi and Qigong. These techniques are often taught at health clubs, YMCAs and senior centers around the country.

Many cancer treatment centers have programs to teach people with cancer and caregivers the basics of relaxation or meditation. Ask your medical team or social worker whether these services are offered.

There are a number of easy-to-follow educational books, websites and audio recordings on this subject that provide step-by-step instructions. A simple internet search can be a great place to start!

Cancer*Care*® Can Help

Founded in 1944, Cancer*Care* is the leading national organization providing free support services and information to help people manage the emotional, practical and financial challenges of cancer. Our comprehensive services include case management, counseling and support groups over the phone, online and in-person, educational workshops, publications and financial and co-payment assistance. All Cancer*Care* services are provided by master's-prepared oncology social workers and world-leading cancer experts.

To learn more, visit **www.cancercare.org** or call **800-813-HOPE (4673)**.

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