

# THE MOTHERS AND BABIES COURSE

## RELAXATION METHODS FOR MANAGING STRESS

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# Stress



Before beginning to learn about relaxation and its benefits, it would be useful to identify the situations and circumstances that prevent us from relaxing. One of the most common obstacles to reaching a relaxed state is stress. We often hear people talking about it, but what is meant by “stress”?

## I. What is stress?



The term stress is generally used to refer to the pressures and tensions that we experience in our daily lives. Stress is the physical and psychological reaction of our body when it is faced with overwhelming situations.

## II. What are the sources of stress?

A variety of situations can cause us to experience stress. These overwhelming situations can be related to what is occurring in our external reality (in the world around us), what is happening in our internal reality (in our mind), and also to what is happening in our body.

- ▶ **Events in our external reality (in the world around us):**  
Such as financial problems, disagreements or conflicts with other people, too many tasks or errands to do and not enough time, too much work, a crying baby that is difficult to console, etc.
- ▶ **Events in our internal reality (in our mind):**  
Such as negative/harmful thoughts, painful memories, worries, negative emotions (i.e. guilt, sadness, frustration, anxiety), etc.
- ▶ **Changes in our body or in our physical condition:**  
Sometimes changes in our body can cause us to feel stress. For example, an illness, headaches, a cold or flu, aches and pains associated with pregnancy, labor pains, fatigue, etc.

## III. In what ways does stress affect us?

Since every person is different, stress affects us all in different ways. It can affect us:

- Physically (causing changes in our body)
- Emotionally (altering our mood and our confidence in our ability to effectively carry out our role as a mother)
- In our behavior (affecting the kind and number of activities we do during the day and allowing less time for pleasant activities)
- In our thoughts (affecting the kinds of thoughts we have)
- In our relationships with others (influencing our relationships with our family, friends, and children).

#### IV. What are the signs that indicate we are stressed?



**Changes in our body:** Our body can detect stress before we become aware of it. Frequently, when we feel stress, various changes, some more obvious than others, occur in the way our body functions.

Here are some common symptoms related to stress:

- Muscle tension
- Head and body aches
- Pain in the neck and shoulder area
- Problems falling asleep, staying asleep, or waking up too early
- Rapid breathing and heart palpitations
- Loss of breath
- Fatigue or tiredness
- Nervousness such as sweating and shaky hands
- Increase or decrease in appetite
- Digestive Problems
- Chest pains
- Nausea or dizziness
- Illness such as a cold or flu (due to a weakened immune system)

**Changes in our mood and in our emotions:** Stress not only affects our body, but also influences our mood, our thoughts, and the activities we do.

- If our mood is regular (if we have a 5 on our mood thermometer) and we are confronted by a stressful situation, it is likely that our mood will get worse, that we will do fewer pleasant activities, and that we will have more negative/harmful thoughts.
- It is normal for this change in mood to happen, but if we continue to feel this way for too long or if we frequently experience these changes in our mood, it could lead to us to develop more serious difficulties such as depression, chronic anxiety, and other psychological problems.

**Changes in our relationships with others:** Our relationships with other people can be affected by the level of stress that we experience in our lives.

- When we are stressed, we become irritated and upset more easily with people around us.
- If we feel sad or if we are often in a bad mood, it is more likely that we will distance or isolate ourselves from other people and that we will have negative contacts with them, which can cause disagreements and friction in our relationships.
- Stress can also affect the way we interact with our children, and the relationship we develop with them. If our children observe that we are constantly in a bad mood or worried, and that we always scold them for anything they do, they will learn that life is full of worries. Consequently, the memories that they will have of their mother will not be as pleasant as they could be.



## V. What can we do to reduce the stress in our lives?

Stress is an inevitable part of our lives. It cannot be avoided completely due to all the obligations, responsibilities, and unexpected events that happen in our lives. While we may not be able to totally eliminate the stress in our lives, we can learn to reduce the amount of stress we experience.

These are steps that we can follow to reduce stress:

### 1. Recognize the signs that indicate we are stressed:

- At first, this step may seem difficult for some, but it is important to notice the changes that stressful situations cause in our body or in our physical condition and in our mood.

**For Example:** Learning to be conscious of the tension in our muscles. When we feel tension in our muscles it is important to take notice because it will help us to recognize the situation that is causing us to be tense, and thus, negatively affecting us.

### 2. Have a plan to manage stress:

- Plan ahead of time what you will do to reduce stress and the effect it has on our lives.

**For example:** Using relaxation methods, having a support system when you are experiencing a stressful situation, resting when you are tired or without energy, following a well-balanced diet, exercising, planning enjoyable activities, giving advice to yourself when you are having negative thoughts, etc.

### 3. Apply the plan:

- Knowing what to do is not enough to manage our stress, but we must also put our plan into practice. To learn to relax, one has to make a conscious effort. Remember that we can only benefit from relaxation methods if we practice them, even if it is only for a few minutes each time.

**For example:** Practice using relaxation methods when a stressful event occurs. People can benefit greatly from using relaxation techniques when they practice them 2 times a day for at least 2 continuous weeks, and then continue to use them regularly.

### 4. Evaluate the relaxation method used:

- After putting your relaxation plan into practice, it is important that you evaluate how you feel after having used a particular relaxation technique and that you also congratulate yourself for having done it. If you do not feel more relaxed after completing a certain relaxation exercise, you can choose another method of relaxation and evaluate it as well.

**For example:** Note your level of stress before you use a relaxation exercise and also afterwards, so you can see if your stress level was reduced. It is also important to note what helped and what did not help you to relax during a particular relaxation exercise.

### 5. Recognize beforehand the situations that cause us stress in our daily lives, to be prepared to deal with these situations:

- By recognizing the situations and events that cause us stress, whether it is in our relationships or in our workplace, we can: (1) prevent similar situations from occurring, or (2) be prepared to deal with these events, which may sometimes be unavoidable.

**For example:** Pay attention to what is happening in your relationship with your spouse/partner, with your baby, with the rest of your family, etc.

# Relaxation



## I. What is relaxation?

Relaxation is a method we can use to manage stress and to reach a healthy balance in our lives. Relaxation exercises can help you to deal with stressful situations when they occur. Relaxation is an enjoyable and pleasant activity that you can share with your baby, so that he/she will not only learn to benefit from these exercises, but will also have wonderful memories of you. Children can be taught how to do relaxation exercises from a very young age, similar to how they are taught to brush their teeth, how to pray, how to be polite, how to eat regularly, etc.

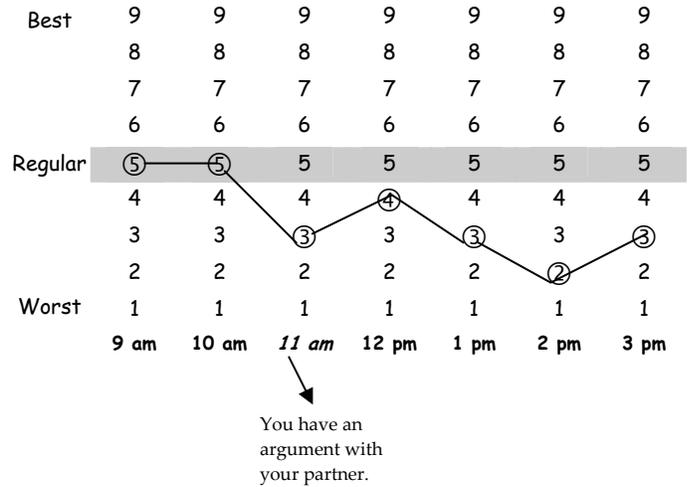
## II. What are some of the benefits of using relaxation methods?

- ▶ **Reduces muscular tension.** Many scientific studies have demonstrated that using relaxation methods is especially beneficial for pregnant women. These methods help to reduce the pain and the tension in the muscles involved during the labor process, such as the muscles in the cervix, the abdomen, and the back.
- ▶ **Helps to sleep.** Many pregnant women have difficulty sleeping due to the baby's movement in the womb or to the discomfort caused by the size of their abdomen, especially during the last few months of pregnancy.
- ▶ **Helps to improve our mood.** When our body is relaxed, we feel calmer, which can increase the likelihood of having a regular mood or better (a 5 or higher on our mood thermometer).
- ▶ **Helps to organize our thoughts.** Relaxation exercises are useful for clearing our mind, especially when we are having difficulty concentrating because we are too tired or busy. Once we are relaxed, it is easier to plan how to effectively manage stress and negative thoughts.
- ▶ **Reduces the need to use alcohol, cigarettes, and other recreational drugs to deal with stress.** Research studies suggest that many bad habits and addictions develop because people do not know how to deal effectively with the stress they encounter. Abuse of these harmful substances increases the risk of suffering from health problems, which over time can put our lives in danger. Instead, your child can learn to deal with stress in a positive way from the example that you set for him/her.
- ▶ **Helps during labor to conserve energy, to reduce fatigue, tension, and pain, and to calm us.** Each woman has a different experience with labor. This depends on the presence of any complications, our expectations, beliefs, and the manner in which we confront stressful situations in our lives. When the body is relaxed, the mind is also relaxed. In other words, you are less anxious and more relaxed, which can greatly help in managing the pain that is part of the labor process. Relaxation is especially helpful in alleviating the aches associated with pregnancy and in diminishing the pains during labor. Although using relaxation methods does not guarantee that you will have a labor without any pain or complications, it can reduce the pain to a level that is more tolerable so you can have a more positive labor experience.

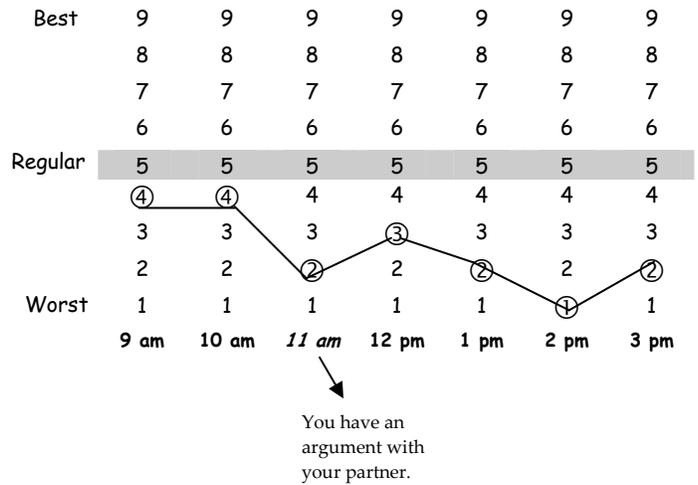
### III. What is the relationship between stress, mood, and relaxation?

Paying attention to your mood and your stress level can prevent unpleasant and distressing moments. Difficult situations happen to us all, but by being prepared to deal with these types of situations we can avoid much unnecessary suffering.

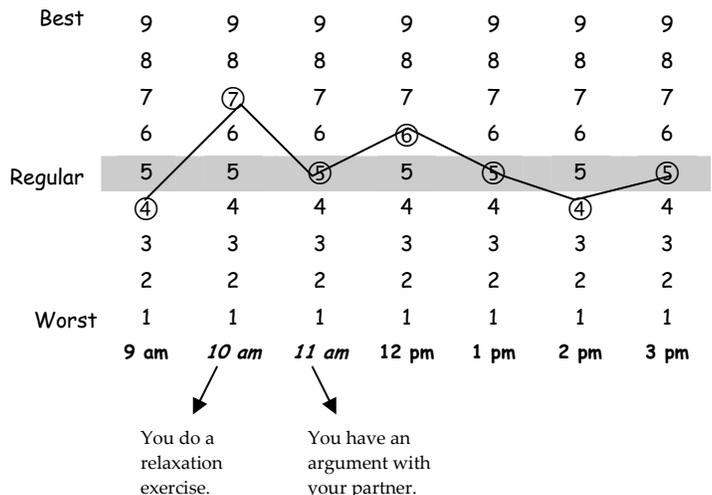
- ▶ You begin the day with a 5 on your mood thermometer, a regular mood, but at 11a.m. you have a disagreement/argument with your spouse/partner, which causes your mood to change for the worse.



- ▶ You begin your day with a 4 on your mood thermometer. If your day has begun with a lower than regular mood, and something upsetting occurs, it is more likely that your mood will go even lower, possibly even to the bottom.



- ▶ You begin the day with a 4 on your mood thermometer. On the one hand, your day has begun exactly like the previous example, but you do something that lifts your mood, such as a relaxation exercise. Even if a stressful event occurs, your mood might drop some, but it will not bring you down as far as if you had not done the relaxation exercise.



#### IV. There are many ways to achieve deep relaxation:

Relaxation exercises are pleasant activities that reduce anxiety and tension. Now that you are learning to recognize your stress level and the negative effects that high levels of stress have on your life, you can begin to reduce your own stress level using the relaxation methods we describe in the following pages. Remember that every person is unique. Each of us will find that some methods will work better for us than others. Find the ones that will work best for you, and which methods (or combination of methods) will be most helpful in certain situations.

Try each of them, and pick the ones that are most to your liking:

- 1) Using your breath to relax
- 2) Using muscle tension to relax
- 3) Using mental images to relax

#### A FEW THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND ABOUT LEARNING TO RELAX



##### 1. Practice, Practice, Practice:

Learning to relax is similar to learning any new skill— like knitting, cooking, or painting. It takes regular practice, patience and time. With consistent practice, you will soon be able to control your bodily tension and experience a greater degree of relaxation.

##### 2. The goal: to relax without doing the exercise:

Once you have mastered the ability to achieve a relaxed state, try to reach this state without doing the exercise, just by simply telling yourself to relax. In this manner, you can begin to apply this new skill in your daily living. We recommend that you start with a relatively simple activity. For example, try relaxing while you are reading the newspaper. Then try it in more challenging situations, such as when you are in a hurry, or when you feel you are about to get angry with someone. Even after you get to this point, it is still useful to occasionally run through the actual exercises to keep in practice and remind yourself how powerful relaxation can be.

##### 3. The relaxation exercises can be done while moving:

This will help you prepare for labor and delivery, when you will probably have to move around, change positions, and be in the midst of activity around you. Your goal is to reach the same level of relaxation while fully alert and moving around as when you were sitting still with your eyes closed. We suggest that you begin practicing these relaxation exercises while sitting still, and gradually increase your activity level while relaxing, until you can relax even while moving relatively fast.

##### 4. As you prepare to relax:

- Choose a quiet, comfortable environment where there are few distractions.
- Choose a time of day when you are least likely to be disturbed, and not too soon after a meal. For example, try relaxing upon awakening or when you are ready to go to sleep. Also, try relaxing during the middle of the day, particularly *just before* you have to do something difficult or *just after* you have had to face a stressful situation.
- Select a comfortable position.
- Try not to worry about how well you are doing. If you begin to experience distracting thoughts, slowly return your mind to the task of relaxing.

## USING YOUR BREATH TO LEARN TO RELAX



### Steps to follow:

- ▶ Sit quietly in a comfortable position.
- ▶ Close your eyes.
- ▶ Relax all your muscles as fully and deeply as possible. Start with either end of the body (your feet or your head) and move systematically all the way up or down, focusing on each muscle, and relaxing each one.
- ▶ Breathe easily and naturally through your nose. Become aware of your breathing. As you breathe out, say a brief word you have chosen to repeat (for example, the word "one" or the word "relax".)
- ▶ Continue for about ten minutes at first, until you get used to producing the feeling of relaxation. Your goal is to be able to produce this feeling in one minute or even less at any time you choose. This way, you can provide yourself with a moment of relaxation as often as you wish throughout your day.
- ▶ Before you open your eyes, remind yourself to retain this feeling of deep relaxation and simultaneous alertness when you return to your normal activities.

*This method is nicely described in a book called *The Relaxation Response* by Herbert Benson (New York: Avon Books, 1975).*



## USING MUSCLE TENSION TO LEARN TO RELAX



This method involves first tightening and then releasing the muscles throughout your body. You will do the following twice for each part of your body: (a) tense the muscle group, (b) hold and study the tension for 5 seconds, then (c) relax the muscles for 20 seconds, noticing the difference in feeling. It's very important to pay attention to the difference between the feeling of tension and the feeling of relaxation. After tensing and relaxing twice, move on to the next muscle group.

- ✓ **Hands.** Tighten your right hand by making a fist and squeezing. Do this twice. Repeat with the left hand.
- ✓ **Forearms and back of hands.** With your right arm resting on a chair, and the back of your hand facing up, bend your hand at the wrist, pointing your fingers straight up. Study the tension this creates in the back of your hand and forearm. Repeat. Now do it with the left hand and arm.
- ✓ **Biceps.** Flex the large muscles in your upper arm by trying to touch your right shoulder with your right fist, tightening the biceps. Repeat. Right arm first, then left.
- ✓ **Shoulders.** Bring your shoulders up, as if to touch your ears with them. Repeat.
- ✓ **Forehead.** Wrinkle your forehead by bringing your eyebrows as far as they will go. Repeat.
- ✓ **Face.** Wrinkle your nose and close your eyes tightly. Repeat.
- ✓ **Lips.** Press your lips tightly together. Repeat
- ✓ **Tongue.** Push your tongue into the roof of your mouth. Repeat
- ✓ **Neck.** Press your head against the back of the chair. Repeat.
- ✓ **Chest.** Take a breath that is so deep you can feel it stretch your chest muscles. Hold it. Release it slowly. Feel yourself relax as the air leaves your lungs. Relax and repeat.
- ✓ **Stomach.** Suck in and tighten your abdomen, as though preparing to receive a punch in the stomach. Repeat. *(We recommend that you skip this step until after you have delivered your baby.)*
- ✓ **Back.** Arch your back away from the chair. Repeat.
- ✓ **Legs and thighs.** Lift your legs up from the chair, holding them straight out in the air. Repeat.
- ✓ **Calves.** Point your toes back toward your chest, creating tension in your lower legs. Repeat.
- ✓ **Feet.** Curl your toes downward, as if digging them into sand. Feel the tension in your arches. Repeat.

*When you have finished this, notice how you feel all over your body. Allow your whole body to remain relaxed a while longer.*

## USING MENTAL IMAGES TO RELAX (Using your imagination)



Another way to relax is to bring your thoughts into harmony with your physical state. You can relax your muscles to relax your mind. You can also relax your mind to further relax your muscles. Certain visual images may bring your thoughts into balance with your relaxed physical state. These images can be used in conjunction with your relaxation practice. They are meant to deepen your relaxation.

1. **Putting down a load.** Imagine yourself carrying all your responsibilities in a big sack on your shoulders. Once you are ready to begin relaxing your muscles, as you sit quietly with your eyes closed, imagine yourself putting down your load. For the time you have allotted to do relaxation, you do not have to worry about it. You are responsible for nothing. You don't have to do anything but relax.
2. **The puppet.** This image is particularly good to use during the time when you are tensing and relaxing your muscles. Think of a puppet standing up straight, being held up by taut strings that make it move. If the puppeteer's hands let go of the strings, they will go loose and the puppet will crumple into a totally relaxed heap. Now, your brain is the puppeteer, and it can let go of you whenever it wants to. As you relax each muscle, imagine letting go of the puppet strings, as it goes limp, you go limp.
3. **The balloon.** Imagine yourself as a balloon that has been inflated to capacity. It is tight, tense. As you use the breathing to help you relax, imagine that you are letting air escape from the balloon. As more and more air escapes, the tightness decreases, the tension disappears. You become wonderfully relaxed.
4. **The cloud.** Imagine yourself as a calm and fluffy cloud. You are floating pleasantly in the middle of a clear blue sky. Feel the wind touching your face. Feel how light you are. Enjoy the peaceful sensation.

*Now stop reading for a while, and conjure up one of the above images. Let the image have its effect on you. Try to think of other images that would relax you. Tailor them to fit you. These images should bring out feelings like those of being relaxed: unwinding, letting go, floating, melting, flowing, smoothness, pleasing warmth or coolness, peacefulness, lightness, having nothing to worry about. Remember that you can enter this state at any moment you wish.*

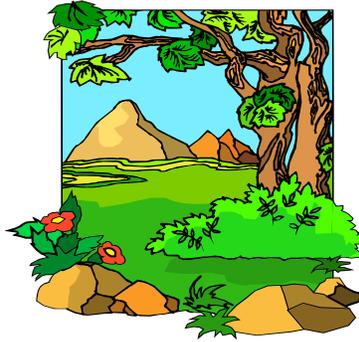
## A COUNTRY DAY



### Steps to follow:

- ▶ Sit in a comfortable chair with your arms at your side or lie down on your bed in a comfortable position with your arms and legs uncrossed. You can also choose any other position in which you feel totally comfortable. We recommend that you ask somebody to read this exercise to you slowly or tape it and play it.
- ▶ Close your eyes. This will allow you to concentrate and to keep your mind from wandering.
- ▶ Put one hand on your abdomen. Now take a deep breath and feel your abdomen rise slowly as you inhale and go down as you exhale. You can mentally say to yourself “in” with each inhalation through your nose and “out” with each exhalation through your mouth (Pause).
- ▶ Begin to focus on your breathing. Inhale deeply through your nose and exhale slowly through your mouth. Each breath you take leaves you more and more relaxed... it purifies your whole body and mind.
- ▶ Now imagine a landscape, any landscape you like. Let your imagination run free and take you to this place. Walk slowly down this path until you can enter into this quiet place in your mind...
- ▶ You have arrived at this beautiful landscape. Look all around you... you see every detail like a picture. Notice the aroma... take a deep breath and let the peace and tranquility of this place spread throughout your entire body. Smell the fresh air mixed with the scent of wild flowers. Now you can begin to hear the sounds, listen to the singing of the birds flying high above you. Look as far as you can see... what do you see? Pause...
- ▶ It is a beautiful day! You feel the soft wind blow through your hair. A gentle breeze caresses your face and body. It is cool and refreshing.
- ▶ As you walk along a path, you see all the beauty surrounding you...
- ▶ You shift your attention to the sun, expanding its rays throughout nature. The sun is radiant... there are no clouds in the sky. Now you feel the sun’s rays wrap your body with warmth... you feel energized...
- ▶ Enjoy this moment... the beauty of this landscape... you feel bathed in peace. You feel relaxed, safe and comfortable. This is a place where there are no worries...
- ▶ Continue breathing and begin to move your body slowly. When you are ready, open your eyes.

## MY SECRET PARADISE



### Steps to follow:

- ▶ Get into a comfortable position, and let the weight of your body rest comfortably on the surface you are sitting or laying on. Rest your arms at your sides or on your lap and avoid crossing your legs. Loosen the tension in your shoulders...in your back...in your chest...
- ▶ Close your eyes... Take a deep breath through your nose...feel your abdomen expand...and hold for 3 seconds...exhale and let the air escape through your mouth...feel how your abdomen relaxes...now return to your normal breathing. Repeat to yourself "Breathe in"... "Exhale"... and breathe regularly again. One more time..."Breathe in"... "Exhale" ...and resume your normal breathing. Continue relaxing your body, allowing your muscles to feel loose.
- ▶ Concentrate on your breathing, letting the entrance and exit of air follow a steady, natural rhythm. Staying very calm... (*Pause for 5 seconds*)
- ▶ Imagine yourself strolling through a meadow...It is a clear, beautiful day...Feel the warmth of the sun touch your face and the soft breeze on your skin...
- ▶ You come to a path and begin walking slowly...you feel very relaxed and calm...In the distance you smell a wonderful aroma...You follow the scent until you reach a wooden door...The aroma is coming from inside...Open the door and walk into this new place...Suddenly, you are surrounded by hundreds of flowers of all different colors and scents...There are also huge trees full of fruit ...The aroma from the flowers and the fruits were what attracted you to this special place.
- ▶ Explore the interior of this place...continue walking inside...Look up at a tree and pick your favorite fruit...Bite into it and taste its sweetness...Feel the refreshing air under the shade of these trees...You hear the sound of rushing water...Follow it ...With every step you take you hear it getting louder...It is a river...Sit at the edge of the fresh, warm water and place your feet in it...Concentrate on this sensation...You feel completely relaxed in this paradise...peaceful and content (*Pause for 10 seconds*)
- ▶ The time has arrived to return to the path that has brought you to this paradise...Before leaving this place smell the aroma of the flowers and trees once more...Continue walking until you reach the door through which you entered...Open it and exit...

*Remember that your paradise awaits you at whatever moment you wish to return. Now take a deep breath one more time...Exhale slowly...When you are ready, open your eyes.*

## WALKING RELAXATION



Most of us walk a lot throughout the course of the day. Therefore, walking can be an activity that can be used to practice relaxation. The following exercise can be done at any time. For example, when you are running an errand or when you are walking in the park with your baby in the stroller. This exercise incorporates walking, breathing, and counting.

### Steps to follow:

- ▶ Focus on your breathing before or while you are walking. Take deep full breaths: inhale through your nose and exhale through your mouth.
- ▶ It is recommended you walk at a slower pace as you begin to do this exercise.
- ▶ Continue concentrating on your breathing. Breathe deeply through your nose and exhale slowly through your mouth. Repeat five times.
- ▶ Now that you are aware of your breathing, count your steps while you breathe deeply.
- ▶ Inhale while you walk and say to yourself "1...2...3..." and now exhale and take five more steps "1...2...3...4...5..." Repeat this and continue breathing deeply and slowly.
- ▶ Continue counting your steps while breathing through your nose and exhaling through your mouth. Your body feels relaxed.

*Try to carry this feeling of relaxation into your everyday life.*

## RELAXING WITH DISTRACTION



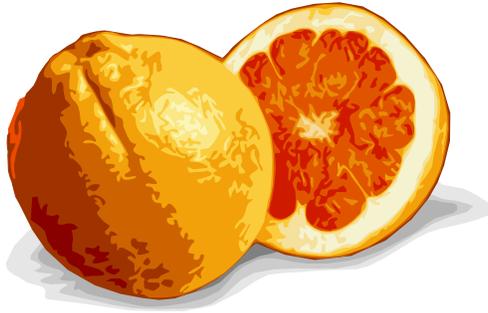
You can use this relaxation strategy in almost any situation, especially when you are experiencing a particularly stressful life event. For example, you can use this exercise when you are waiting in a long line at the store or when you are ready to give birth. For this exercise you can use any fruit or food that you enjoy such as an apple, or imagine a food or dish of your choice (it could be your favorite pastry, a dish from home, or a cup of tea).

### Steps to follow:

- ▶ Pay attention to signs that you are stressed. (For example, your muscles feel tight or your breathing is shallow and rapid).
- ▶ Concentrate on your breathing (you can do this either with your eyes closed or open). Breathe in deeply through your nose and exhale slowly through your mouth. One more time, breathe in through your nose and gently let the air flow out through your mouth.
- ▶ Now that you are focusing on your breathing, in the next five minutes, concentrate on the apple or image of a food to help you focus on the present.
- ▶ Observe the color of the food or fruit. Now focus on its shape. Touch it and notice its texture, how it feels. For example, if you are imagining your favorite pastry, observe its different colors, what it feels like as you hold it, and its smell.
- ▶ Think about where this particular food came from. Did it grow from the soil? What part of the world did it come from? What steps are necessary to prepare this food?
- ▶ Focus on what you are looking at or imagining at the present moment. Enjoy the aroma of that food before you put it in your mouth. Notice its taste and texture while it is in your mouth.
- ▶ It is natural to be distracted by other thoughts. However, when this happens, return to the present and continue focusing on your enjoyment of this food.
- ▶ Continue using the food or image that you created to continue focusing on the present, on what you are doing, and your breathing. Try not to think of what you have to do afterwards or what you did last week.
- ▶ Breathe in deeply through your nose and exhale slowly through your mouth. One more time, breathe in through your nose and gently let the warm air escape through your mouth.

*Notice how you feel at this moment (your stress level, your breathing). It is important to focus on the present and "practice being in the present."*

## THE ORANGE EXERCISE



### Steps to follow:

- ▶ You need an orange for this exercise.
- ▶ For the next two minutes you are going to try to think only about the orange that is in front of you.
- ▶ Sometimes your thoughts may wander, and you may find yourself thinking about other things, like things that are worrying you. When that happens, you should try to return to the orange.
- ▶ You may look at the orange and think about what it looks like, how it feels, how it smells. You can choose to do what you want with the orange. You can peel it, eat it, or just look at it.
- ▶ When you are done doing this, reflect on what it was like to just think about the orange and nothing else and think about some of the thoughts that came up as you were observing their oranges. Also determine whether focusing on the orange changed any thoughts you were having and how you were feeling. If you like, you can also rate your mood and compare your rating to the rating you gave before beginning the exercise.

*You may have difficulty keeping their thoughts focused on the orange. Remember that it is hard for you to forget about all the things you have to do and focus on the orange. However, being in the moment is a very important skill that can reduce stress. In the future, you will want to be in the present with your child and be able to have moments where you are just able to focus on being and playing with her/him without thinking about other things you have to do. Also, if you do not have an orange, you can do this exercise with anything. The idea is to practice mindfulness, meaning practicing being in the moment and having your thoughts be in one place, where you are in the present. We use the orange to serve as an anchor to the present. You could also use a flower, a tree, a cup of tea, anything really although we have found that objects that have connections to multiple senses are the most useful.*

## LISTENING TO MUSIC



### Steps to follow:

- ▶ In this exercise, you will be relaxing by listening to some music. Research suggests that babies benefit from listening to classical music even before they are born, especially classical music. Music can be relaxing for both mothers and children. Mothers can pass on the relaxation skills to their children.
- ▶ Please get comfortable. Play a piece of classical music or other relaxing music for 3 minutes. If you feel like it, close your eyes and let the music help you relax. You can also place your hands on your bellies and see if you can feel your baby moving.
- ▶ After you are done listening to a piece of classical/relaxing music, try to answer these questions: what were some of the thoughts that came up as you were listening to the music? Did you have any thoughts about your baby and how your baby was listening to the music?

*You can choose any music that you like to relax with. We are all different and we might like different types of music. In general, music is something that may help your baby relax. If your baby listens to a piece of music in the womb, that same music may help her/him relax once they are born. Once your baby is born, playing a specific bedtime lullaby, can help get her/him into a pattern where they associate sleep with that song. This will help your baby get into a nighttime ritual where she/he learns to relax with the song and then goes to sleep.*

## A PLEASANT PLACE



### Steps to follow:

- ▶ In this exercise, you will use your imagination to help you relax. To begin with think of a place where you like to be, your favorite place. It can be anywhere.
- ▶ Now close your eyes and let's begin by taking a couple of deep breaths. Breathe in and out... With each breath you are getting closer to your favorite place... Breathe in and out. You are now there. Let your body relax in your favorite place. What do you see there?... Look up... to your right... to your left... look down... What do you smell?... What do you hear?... Breathe deeply and just feel the way it feels to be in your favorite place. This is a good place for you where there is peace and where you feel at home... safe...
- ▶ Stay in this place... (for 5 minutes).
- ▶ Now it's time to come back, but you will keep this special place with you, and you know you can return to this place when you want to.
- ▶ Let's breathe in and out... Take a step back and look around at your special place. It is a part of you... Breathe in and out and step back... Breathe in and out and slowly open your eyes.
- ▶ Continue to breathe in and out, so you can keep the feeling of relaxation that you get when you are in your special place.
- ▶ After you are done listening to a piece of classical/relaxing music, try to answer these questions: Where were you? Were you able to let go and really be in that place? What kinds of thoughts did you have during the exercise? How did that make you feel? What did you think when you had to leave the special place? How did that make you feel?

*This exercise demonstrates how powerful our thoughts are. Just by imagining being in a special place, you can change the way you feel. Your negative thoughts are just as powerful. When you focus on the negative things in your life or think in negative ways, you are likely to feel bad. This exercise shows how important it is to be aware of the types of thoughts you are having because they influence how you feel. It also shows that it is possible to change the way you think.*

## TEACHING YOUR CHILD TO RELAX WITH YOU



- ▶ Your child will learn to calm down and relax, when he/she is frustrated, from the example that you set.
- ▶ We recommend that you begin to teach your child these relaxation strategies early on. That way, it becomes easier to continue practicing these exercises with your child as he/she grows older.
- ▶ Ways to relax with your child (1 to 4 years of age): Sing to your infant (or put on relaxing music) when he/she cries or when he/she is ready to eat or go to bed. Enjoying a relaxation exercise with your child will result in a strong and healthy bond between the two of you.
- ▶ Ways to relax with your child (5 years or older): Continue practicing these relaxation exercises together to share in these pleasant activities. These exercises will also help your child when he/she is angry. For example, your child will begin to notice when she/he is stressed and learn to breathe to calm down, with the guidance of his/her mother.
- ▶ The most important part of learning these exercises is to praise your child when she/he chooses to use them as a way to handle stress (for example, giving them a hug or star), instead of using a more destructive form (for example, hitting other children). In this way, your child will behave in a healthy manner and she/he will have more positive experiences with other children.
- ▶ It is important that you practice these relaxation exercises first so that you can then teach these strategies to your child. It is also important to keep in mind that it will take time for you and your child to realize the benefits of these exercises.

**Remember:** We can reach a healthy balance in our lives by becoming aware of how we react to stress, which is related to our external reality (the events that occur in our lives and in our environment) and our internal reality (our thoughts and emotions), and by knowing how to counter the negative effects of stress. Remember that relaxation only takes a few minutes of your day. Practicing these exercises will bring you many benefits so that you can enjoy life to its fullest and enjoy your role as a mother.

## EVALUATING YOUR RELAXATION EXERCISE

- ▶ An important part of these relaxation exercises is to evaluate them and examine how they make you feel afterwards. We recommend that you practice these exercises 2 times a day (when you first wake up and before you go to bed).
- ▶ Use the table below to help you evaluate your exercises every day. Place a circle around the number that best reflects your level of stress, both before and after completing each relaxation exercise you choose. Write down what helps you and what does not help you relax during each practice.



How do you feel?:      ① = Little or No Stress      ⑤ = Moderately Stressed      ⑨ = Extremely Stressed

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