

# Relaxation Techniques and Mind/Body Practices: How They Can Help You Cope With Cancer

Cancer and its treatment can be stressful for people with cancer and their caregivers. Fortunately, there are coping techniques that can help to calm a person's mind and sharpen his or her ability to focus.



Relaxation techniques and other mind/body practices offer creative ways to reduce stress caused by cancer and maintain inner peace. For example, some people with cancer and their caregivers use these techniques to help them relax as they wait for treatments or tests results.

**Here are some techniques that can help you cope with the challenges of cancer:**

**Deep Breathing Techniques.** At the core of life is breath. Laughing and sighing are the body's natural ways of forcing us to breathe deeply. That is why people often feel calm or rejuvenated after these experiences. Anxiety and stress, on the other hand, can make us take in short, shallow breaths. Shallow breathing does not allow enough oxygen to enter our bodies, which can make us more anxious.

*Try the following simple breathing exercise. It can be done anywhere, anytime:*

1. Take in a deep breath from your diaphragm (the muscle between the lungs and the abdomen).
2. Hold it for several seconds – however long is comfortable – and then exhale slowly.
3. Repeat steps 1 and 2 two more times.
4. Afterwards, relax a moment and let yourself feel the experience of being calm.

Your oncology social worker or nurse may be familiar with deep breathing exercises or be able to refer you to others who can help you learn these techniques.

**Meditation.** Repetitive prayers are a form of meditation. Two other traditional forms of meditation include “one-pointed” meditation and “two-pointed” meditation.

- **One-pointed meditation** focuses on a word or sound, called a *mantra*. Many people create their own mantra from an affirming word, such as “peace,” “love,” or “hope.” Once you have a mantra, you repeat it to yourself during 15- to 20-minute sittings in a safe, quiet place.

The goal is to relax the mind, which has a natural tendency to jump from idea to idea – and from one worry to the next. Rather than trying to force your mind back to the mantra when you notice you have wandered, you can guide it

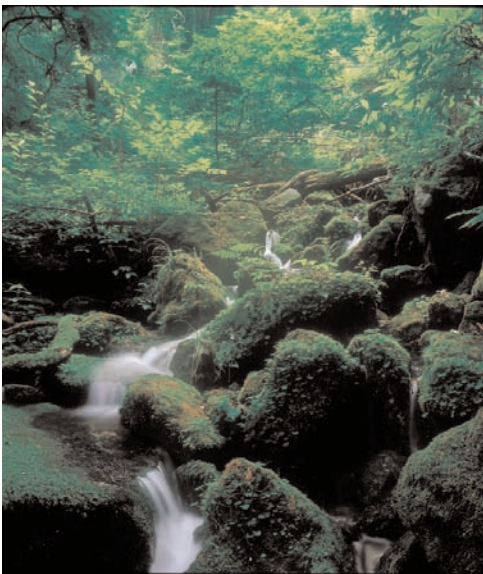
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back gently, accepting that it will stray again. This technique, perfected by Dr. Herbert Benson, is called the *relaxation response*. Often, your oncology social worker or nurse can refer you to people in your community who can help you learn this technique.

- **Two-pointed meditation** is also called “mindful” or “insight” meditation. In this kind of meditation, you concentrate your focus on your breath in order to relax the mind. As your mind jumps from idea to idea, you practice “non-judgmental awareness,” simply observing the pattern of your thoughts, while guiding them back to focus on your breath.

Observing your emotions or sensations in a non-judgmental way allows you to separate yourself from them rather than getting pulled into them. One benefit of mindful meditation is that it can be done while seated or doing daily activities. The goal is to focus your mind, and to observe your thoughts in a non-judgmental way.

Sometimes cancer treatment centers have programs to teach people with cancer and their caregivers the basics of meditation. There are also a number of easy-to-follow commercial books available on this subject.



**Guided Imagery.** This stress-reducing technique incorporates deep breathing and meditation. Your mind imagines a peaceful scene or setting, often from a memory, as you practice deep breathing. In this place of calm relaxation, you can create a “wakeful dream” in which you may envision pain washing away or your body getting stronger and healthier.

There are numerous commercial audio recordings available that provide step-by-step instructions to guide a person’s images. These exercises are often accompanied by “ambient sounds,” usually music or sounds from nature, such as a waterfall. Sometimes just listening to ambient sounds is enough to relax your mind and briefly transport you emotionally to a place in which you feel more safe and secure.

### CancerCare Can Help

There are many other techniques that can help with stress. CancerCare has a staff of professionally trained oncology social workers who understand the challenges of cancer. We can help you develop your own strategies for reducing stress and maintaining inner peace as you cope with cancer. We also provide education, counseling, financial help and practical help, and all our services are completely free of charge.



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