



RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

Relaxation techniques help athletes manage nerves, reduce muscle tension, and/or improve focus before, during, and after practice/competition. Strategies such as meditation and breathing help athletes relax their bodies and minds, so they can perform their best when it counts!

RELAXATION TECHNIQUES HELP ATHLETES:

- Improve performance ²
- Better regulate their emotions ¹
- Improve concentration ³
- Decrease performance anxiety ⁶
- Enhance recovery ⁴
- Reduce muscle tension ⁵
- Improve sleep ⁴
- Decrease heart rate, cortisol levels, and other markers of stress ⁷



ELEMENTS

- 1 Relaxation techniques can be used as prep, during or after practice/competition, and in life, too.
- 2 Psychological (mental or cognitive) and physiological (bodily or somatic) responses to stress are reduced when using these techniques.
- 3 These techniques can be paired with other mental performance strategies such as self-talk, attention shifting, and goal setting.

TYPES

- 1 **"Body-to-Mind" Techniques:** Change bodily sensations to shift athletes' mental responses to pressures and performances (e.g., breathing).
Example: A gymnast does one deep breath before her beam routine.
- 2 **"Mind-to-Body" Techniques:** Use the mind to change athletes' bodily responses in performance moments (e.g., meditation).
Example: A bowler says to himself, "I am calm," before stepping up to bowl.

THE ROLE OF THE COACH

- Determine the most effective individual and team relaxation techniques for your sport context & team.
- Teach athletes how to use relaxation techniques to prepare for performance and dedicate time during training/workouts to practice them.
- Encourage athletes to practice techniques outside of practice just like they would technical skills.
- Help athletes plan for moments when these techniques will be used (e.g., before kickoff).
- Communicate to your athletes the benefits of relaxation techniques for performance and life.

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RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

DEFINITION	WHEN TO USE	TIME	INSTRUCTIONS
PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION (PMR)			
The systematic tensing and relaxing of major muscle groups progressively throughout the body ⁹	The night before or several hours before competition <i>*Avoid using PMR immediately before practice or competition to avoid injury risk</i>	10-15 mins.	Instruct athletes to get comfortable sitting or lying down. Ask them to inhale and squeeze the feet and toes tight, tensing all the muscles in their feet. Hold for 3-5 seconds. Exhale and relax the muscles for 10 seconds. Continue inhaling, tensing, exhaling, and relaxing through each muscle group (legs, core, arms, & shoulders/head). After finishing, allow athletes to pause and notice the relaxed feeling for a minute.
BREATHING TECHNIQUES			
A specific breathing pattern to calm down the body and nervous system	Before/during competition when experiencing nerves, making a mistake, or refocusing before a big moment	2-5 breaths	Box Breathing: Inhale for 4 counts, hold for 4 counts, exhale for 4 counts, & hold for 4 counts. On each breath/hold, trace/visualize tracing 1 side of a square. 4-7-8 Breathing: Inhale for 4 counts, hold for 7 counts, & exhale with a 'whoosh' sound for 8 counts. Repeat. <i>Remind athletes to expand the belly (diaphragm), not the chest, when inhaling.</i>
AUTOGENIC TRAINING			
A series of exercises where athletes use words or phrases to focus on the feelings they want to have ¹⁰	Before/during competition to prepare for pressure moments (e.g., a free throw) and calm nerves	1-15 mins.	Instruct athletes to begin breathing in and out. Instruct them to repeat various phrases in their head: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> "My heartbeat is calm and regular." "My stomach feels sturdy."
MEDITATION			
A present moment awareness where attention is focused on the thoughts, feelings, body, and surroundings without judgement ¹¹	Regularly and/or the night before/after or several hours before/after competition	1-30 mins.	At the end of practice, share that meditation is simply sitting or standing quietly and paying attention to the present moment. Instruct athletes to find comfortable positions. Begin breathing and say: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> "What do you see, hear, smell in this space?" "Imagine a peaceful place like a park, beach, etc." "Bring to mind a song/tune you know well. How do you feel hearing this song?"
OTHER HELPFUL RELAXATION TECHNIQUES			
Strategies that help athletes relax and manage stress	Before competition and/or as a part of a pre-performance routine	1-15 mins.	Help athletes identify 1-2 two strategies: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Music: Choose a song and play it. Ask athletes to listen to the beat, lyrics, or sounds of the music. Stretching: Teach stretches such as low lunges, forward bends, child's pose, and bridge pose. Journaling: Instruct athletes to write about their day, practice, or competition for 5 minutes. Mental Imagery: Have athletes visualize potential tactics, skills, and challenges using all five senses to prepare for competition. ¹²

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