

Tension Relieving Exercises

Hello. This is Molly Brennan, your host for the stress podcast. In this installment of the Stress podcast I am going to teach you five simple stretching exercises that you can do anytime, any place, even at your desk.

These stretches may not seem like much, but when you make it a point to take the time to do them a few times each day, you'll be rewarded with fewer back and muscle aches and a feeling of greater calm in your body and in your mind.

You can learn these exercises by following along with me. The whole routine is going to take about five minutes. Start out by taking a seat. Plant your feet on the floor a comfortable distance apart. If you're sitting at your desk, push your chair back a bit for some breathing room.

The first exercise is one that you probably already know -- the shoulder roll. This is great for relieving tension and giving those neck and back muscles a break. It's especially good for those of us who sit in front of computers all day.

1. Shoulder rolls

OK -- Sit upright. Take a deep breath in and scrunch your shoulders up to meet your ears. Gather all the tension in, and hold it there a second. Now slowly roll your shoulders back, pushing out your chest and bringing your shoulder blades down in back. Let's do this three more times.

Take a deep breath in and let all the tension out, slowly rolling your shoulder blades down in back.

Feel the stress and tension leaving your neck and upper back as you continue to breathe.

Now let's switch sides. Bring your shoulders back up to your ears and then this time roll them forward. Feel the muscles in your back stretching. Your upper body may come forward a little bit as you slowly roll your shoulder blades, completing the circle.

Let's do that two more times. Breathe in, bring your shoulders up to your ears, and slowly roll them forward as you exhale.

Take a deep breath in, and bring your shoulders up again, rolling them forward.

2. Neck stretch

The next exercise is a neck stretch. This is another one that's great for people who look at a computer or talk on the phone a lot during the day.

Sit upright and bring your back away from the back of the chair. Make your spine very straight. Breathe in, and then, as you breathe out, drop your right ear all the way down toward your right shoulder. Feel the stretch along the left side of your neck. Take a few deep breaths in this position. Let those muscles release their tension and really stretch out.

Bring your head back to the center positions and switch sides. Drop your left ear to your left shoulder and breathe in and out deeply as you take the stretch on the right side of your neck.

You may want to finish off by gently dropping your chin down and around in front, swinging it over to your right shoulder and then back again.

Repeat this whole sequence two or three times, continuing to breathe in and out slowly and deeply. Stretch to the right. Feel the tension start to release out of your neck muscles as they get longer and looser. And then switch to the left and do it again, feeling your neck stretch longer and looser.

3. Chair Twist

Now we're going to do a chair twist. Twists are great for releasing the back muscles that are tense from sitting down for long periods of time.

Sit forward in your chair and slide your knees to the left so you are sitting diagonally in the chair with your knees pressed up as close to the left edge of the chair as you can get them. Breathe in, then exhale slowly. As you exhale, bring both hands around to the right arm or the back of the chair, giving your spine a gentle twist as you grab on to the arm or the back of the chair and look over your right shoulder. Take deep breaths as you stay in this position.

Continue looking over your shoulder while holding your head straight.

You should have your legs pointed to the left and your upper body twisted to the right.

The twist should come from your middle as you look over your right shoulder. Don't forget to breathe.

Now switch sides. Move your knees over to the right side of the chair and reach around with your hands to the left, allowing your spine to take a gentle twist as you look over your left shoulder. Breathe deeply.

Feel your spine relaxing. As you breathe in, see if you can twist a little more deeply, giving your spine a big stretch. Exhale and continue to look over your right shoulder.

Now we're going to move on to some wrist exercises. These are great for keeping your wrists and joints loose and avoiding repetitive stress injuries like carpal tunnel.

4. Wrist circles

Sit forward in your chair so your back is not touching and your spine is straight. Reach up and over your head with both arms. Stretch them out as high as you can go.

Now extend your fingers, opening your hands up to feel the stretch in your palms.

Now make a fist with each hand. With tight fists, begin to draw small circles to the right by rotating your wrist. You should feel the stretch in your wrist and the muscles and tendons along your forearm.

Draw a couple more circles and then, keeping your arms straight above your head and your wrists clenched, draw five more circles to the other side. Let the muscles in your wrists and forearms lengthen and loosen as you rotate the wrists.

OK. Keeping your arms above your head, unclench your fists. Relax your hands. Give them a quick shake before bringing them back down to your sides.

6. Side stretch

The final stretch is a side stretch. You can do this either sitting or standing. If you're sitting, sit forward with a straight back. Raise your right hand above your head with your palm open to the left. Slowly bend your upper body over to the left while keeping your arm straight. Allow the right side of your body to open up and get a really good stretch. Hold this position for a few seconds while you breathe deeply into the stretch. Keep your feet firmly planted on the floor to maintain your balance.

Now switch sides. Bring your left arm up above your head with your palm facing to the right and bend your upper body to the right. Feel the stretch on the entire left side of your body. Really breathe into it. Let the tension go out of your left side and back.

Now a nice way to finish up this quick tension-relieving stretch routine is to take five deep breaths.

Breathe in through your nose. Allow your breath to fill up the belly, and then slowly let it back out. Let's repeat this five times.

Breathe in, filling up your belly. Slowly exhale.

Again. Breathe in slowly, letting all that good air travel through your body. Then slowly exhale, letting it back out.

Once more. Breathe in and let the air fill up your belly like a balloon. And slowly exhale.

This stretching routine is a great way to take a quick break during your work day. It only takes a few minutes but it can leave you feeling refreshed and energized.