

4 - BODY RELAXATION



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Contents

- Opportunities
- Tension
- Relaxation
- Exercise**: Amplification
- Exercise**: Release

Opportunities

A misconception that pervades “sleep science” is that sleep is an unconscious state, a state in which you are not involved, to which you make no active contribution. Similarly, the different stages of sleep are portrayed as inaccessible to your communication, so that you are basically locked out of having anything but a lifeless, mechanical relationship with your sleeping self.

Psychology is considered -- in so much as it's considered at all -- as the actions of your rational, ruminating mind. For adherents of this description, your waking intellect is everything. The possibility of your having any control of your state or process while you are asleep is not considered. What happens in your mind while you are asleep is seen as nothing more than a disconnected set of thoughts that keep you awake at night.

In your search to remedy your sleep issues be aware that the field of sleep science medicine has limited credibility as a science, as a medicine, or even as a description of sleep. I consider it myopic and I have not found it to be valuable. We are looking beyond it here.

Sleep is an active state, but a state in which your normal levels of self-control and social presentation are not useful. Normal self-control is absent in sleep, though some level of control can be regained with training. Your social presentation is a state of conflict, carrying on a struggle for self-love, self-respect, and self-acceptance. These struggles are important, or feel important, but they are sources of dis- and re-integration, and generators of disquiet.

Learning to sleep is learning to elevate the struggle for self-understanding to an accepting, nurturing, and transformative chemistry. That is, learning to take the search for meaning within yourself, and beyond your intellect. Sleep is not turning out the lights, it is turn out the house lights. And with the house lights out, the stage lights come up, and the plot continues.

Tension

Your tensions, fears, and drives are a silent shout. To move these forward, to mix them with the digestive enzymes of your subconscious, you need to unrestrict, de-armour, relax, and unjam. You need to do this in ways that you have not, and probably will not do during waking life, the life built according to your conscious mind.

Learning to sleep well is not that different from learning to live well. The first step is learning to relax. This is mostly a “not doing,” which is easier than a doing. And while what each of us needs to “not do” is different, we are led to it in every case by following our tension.

We each carry different tensions in different places, so these relaxation exercises have different meanings for each of us. Focus on your landscape, and realize that each of us travels a different geography. So different, in fact, that your journey to relaxation might take you to landscapes beyond anything I can describe, or imagine.

Sleep is a process of refreshing your growth, intelligence, and evolution. In sleep each of your 40 trillion cells are considered, consulted, and attended. Forty trillion. And how many words can you hold in your mind at any one moment? About seven. Sleep is not a task helped by your conscious mind.

The refreshing that happens during sleep is not like a soft drink, it is a total, ancestral body refreshment. That part of you that wakes up feeling refreshed is a minuscule part of you. It is a part we call your “executive function” which, for most of us, is a history of assault that looks like the surface of the moon. What is actually refreshed through sleep exceeds the limits of our understanding.

Compared to sleep, the still unfathomable process by which your body heals a cut is a tiny affair. Sleep involves tasks of which your normal state of awareness cannot conceive. A fully health-creating and creative sleep looks like relaxation to your conscious mind only in the sense that your daily mind’s chatter is shut off.

In this chapter we’re approaching sleep as a process of entering relaxation, and relaxation means disengagement from focus and tension, and engagement with a slower, deeper awareness. It’s fair to call this state of relaxation “sleep” only if you recognize it as an active, energized, and creative state. A disturbed and nonrestorative unconsciousness should not be called “sleep.” If you’re not being revitalized and waking up feeling nourished, you’re not sleeping.

Relaxation

First, let’s understand relaxation. It is not a state of absence, a state of being inert or static. Relaxation is a state of flow in which every living aspect of you, from your muscles to your organs,

to your mind, function at their best. In a relaxed state the elements of your body flow within themselves, at their own rhythms, and with respect to their environment.

Relaxation is the opposite of disengagement. It is a state of full engagement, but engagement that is balanced, unthreatened, and homeostatic: a state that governs itself. It doesn't require you, and it is in that respect, and only in that respect, that relaxed means disengaged. It is YOU that is disengaged, and in your place everything else is engaged, aware, responsive, and working at their natural rhythms. Full relaxation is a state of complete connection with and balance within your universe. As such, complete relaxation is unfathomable.

What are we talking about? I'm not sure I know. We've been talking about what we don't know, and it's not clear how one learns what one doesn't know. There seems to be the potential for something to happen. If it were creating a new perception, then I could understand, but how can you "create" new perception? Maybe it's all about focus and attention. Maybe it's about memory, things once known but since forgotten. There are so many "maybes" it almost makes me nauseous, as if I've lost my balance, so let's refocus on simpler things.

Let's relax into what we **do** know. Let's explore what we do feel, without getting elaborate. Let's just release our muscle tension. This is a good complement to the broadening exercise we just did. In this exercise we broaden into simplicity and stillness. Instead of exploring the city of infinite complexity, we'll explore an ocean of infinite quiet.

Exercise: Amplification

Take a moment to focus on a point on the back of your hand. Look at a spot. Attend to the feeling in this spot. Consider its temperature, the pulse through it, and any tensions around it. Consider how much safer and more vital this spot of tissue would be if you spent your entire day focused on its needs, feelings, and perceptions,... but you don't. Nor do you consider almost any other spot anywhere on your body, except when you hurt yourself, or feel yourself in danger. That is all that your conscious mind does for your body, although clearly, at some level, subconsciously, some aspect of you is aware of every part of your body, below levels you have ever been consciously aware of.

Most of what you consider "you" is hardly in touch with the whole of you. Much of this "being in touch" is so diffuse and internally aware that you would not recognize it as a state of mind. The "you" who you identify with is the hyperactive and somewhat paranoid chatterbox who is always waiting for the next shoe to drop. This person plays an essential role in your protection in an assaulting world, but they interfere with sleep. Sleep is your full-body connection, a more serious process than the trivial issues you take seriously.

Return to that spot on the back of your hand. Imagine now that this tissue is actually connected to all the processes in your body. Imagine that this tissue knows the state of

your heart through the oxygen it receives in the blood. It knows the state of your kidneys from the waste products that circulation has removed. Imagine that this tissue knows the state of your liver by the balance of water, sugar, proteins, and other chemicals that bathe it. It knows the state of your immune system by the quantity, health, and sensitivity of the immune cells that pass by it. It even knows, inasmuch as it might care, what you're thinking and feeling by virtue of your emotional hormones, the activating and sedating chemicals controlling your metabolism, temperature, moods, and orientation.

You must imagine these things because that's how you create possibilities, and these imaginings in particular are all true, were true, and will continue to be true whether or not you ever have the foggiest idea of what's really going on in your body.

My point is that compared to just about any small piece of tissue in your body, you are so woefully ignorant of just about everything that's happening in your body as to be considered a hopeless moron. Yet here you are, making all the decisions. And after all is said and done, you are the person built for this task. Is it any wonder you might have some difficulty getting to sleep!

Take this exercise in imagination one step further. Imagine that this piece of tissue in the back of your hand, through the mysterious power of nerves and connective tissues, knows the state of other tissues in other parts of the back of your hand. So that the back of your hand is a whole conscious organism connected even more firmly, extensively, and democratically to the palm of your hand, to your knuckles, fingers, and wrist. To your forearm which has soft tissues, major arteries, muscles, joints, cartilage, living bone, a filigree of nerves throughout. And there are electric fields of many kinds, signals traveling within dendrites, currents traveling outside nerve sheaths, charges maintained on cell and facial surfaces, and fields extending out and around the tissues, even extending out beyond the surface of your body.

Feel these connections in your imagination as a kind of symphony that you don't hear unless you listen, and you cannot hear the whole symphony except by listening for parts of it, and it doesn't sound so much like music as it sounds like a city of infinite textures of sounds and signals at every level, frequency, and volume.

Let this sense of overwhelming wholeness extend up your whole arm, into your shoulder, into the flat bone of your shoulder blade that fans out with nerves, muscles, and facia to connect all down and across your back, to your spine, your pelvis, and up your neck to your skull.

And while you're at it, create the symmetry of the same whole connectivity that exists on the other side of your body: the back of your other hand, palm, knuckles, wrist, forearm, elbow, upper arm, and shoulder joint. So that now you are a huge, nearly infinite and

indescribable complex of muscle, tissue, movement, memory and emotion that is simply your arms, connected to your body.

Below this grand yoke of everything that humanity has ever fashioned with its hands resides your heart, a repository of wisdom, it has been said. Half nerves half muscle, a heart can affect the life path of those it's transplanted into. The size of your fist, with a magnetic field the size of a small elephant. Pour yourself into your heart, feel its rhythm strong enough to be sensed by others, visible to animals with a sixth electric sense. You once had this too, can you find it? Make stronger the field around your heart. How is that done? Have you ever tried?

Think of your family, your parents, and children. Think of all you take for granted in being here, how much you yearn to grow, and see, and feel. Place yourself in your own heart, protected by your shoulders, chest, and back, and project out the message of who and where you are. Phone home to accept yourself as a child, as you must, before accepting yourself as you have grown to be.

Inside your expanding vision picture yourself getting smaller ... and smaller within the enormity of these basic systems. Braced between your shoulders your heart considers you with empathy and pathos: how little you know. How little you are aware of it. How little you appreciate all that is you, connected to every other part of you, something that you can sense if listen for it.

And why don't you? Because it is so damned complicated, that's why. But your body knows and, at some level below your consciousness, you are aware. It's just your mind, or what you think is your mind, that can't cope with it.

The word "relax" means "to set free, loosen and make wide again." And what do you do in order to relax? You go for a walk. You have a cup of tea. Get some exercise, or take a rest! And this is my point: relaxation is actually a state of such monumental complexity and connection that is seems utterly blank. Relaxation is blank like the universe is blank, which it absolutely isn't, but it looks that way when you set yourself free, and close your eyes.

So relax. And see your mind getting smaller, and your connection to yourself getting wider, loosening. Imagine that in everything you hear, and feel, and think comes messages of everything in your body from the smallest bacteria's single voice, to the huge heart muscle's collective motion and massive magnetic field.

You are a point of awareness in a jungle garden of trees and flowers, orchids and insects, seeds, fruits, animals, vines, bromeliads, bushes, fungus, lichen, sprouting seeds, and decaying matter. Because that is what you are: a massive ecosystem that maintains itself, built of trillions of separate systems, some human but many not, some expanding throughout you, and other contained within you.

And in your imagination see yourself as a speck of consciousness, like a tiny visitor, carried on the air currents, awed and overwhelmed at the enormity of what you're made of. Humbled by how little you actually know. Open yourself up to it more, gradually, beyond the point of remembering, recognition, or recollection, to the point where your tongue just wages helplessly, unable to encircle anything with words.

And this is where you want to stay for a while, in this simple receptive state. You can close your eyes or not, it doesn't matter since there is no way you could take it all in anyway. And there is a name for this transcendental, almost psychedelic state. It's called relaxation. And as you relax more it only becomes larger, wider, looser, and all you can do is let yourself go and be blown away into and beyond it.

Let's do a counting induction to being even more relaxed. Counting is so useful as a gateway because it takes up so much of your mind and is an obviously meaningless activity. Now I want to make a point that thinking meaningless thoughts is not relaxing by itself, it's only relaxing when meaningfulness is palpable, such as counting, or watching clouds, flames, or waves. You think meaningless thoughts often, in fact almost everything you think is of no importance, and would be better left unsaid. You can teach yourself to think less, and doing so will really help your sleep!

I'm going to count backwards from 100, and after each number I say I want you to whisper the word "deeply relaxed" out loud. So I'll say 100, and you'll say "deeply relaxed." Then I'll say 99, and you'll say "deeply relaxed." And this will go one for a while, and I want you to listen to yourself say "deeply relaxed," and I want you to listen for my stating the next number in the series. And with every number I say, and with every utterance of "deeply relaxed," you become more deeply relaxed. Say it, feel it, and let it reverberate through you as my numbers just fade away...

"100," now you say, "deeply relaxed."

99

98

97

96

95

94

93

92

91

Let these numbers float like leaves on a pond.

90

Shift your focus to the water under the surface of the leaves.

89

A darker, quieter, and more textured world.

88

A world of shadows and currents, and also of growing plants, little animals, frogs, and fish. We can't see it clearly because we have no clear memories, we are not focusing, and we're not thinking clearly. And without focus you have to become calm, because you spread out... and move into softer feelings.

With each breath let yourself be twice as relaxed, as if with each breath the number of you doubles, and the size of your mind shrinks in awareness, in response. Like a drop of oil, with each breath your body spreads across the surface of this pond, letting yourself get thinner and lighter. Let your body take over while you drift into a visitor state, this is the first stage of sleep.

(wait 30 seconds)

And this is the end of this exercise. Return to awareness or go further in this state, as you prefer.

Exercise: Release

Begin seated or lying down in a quiet place at a quiet time. Turn off the phone, the computer, and all the buzzers and zappers that keep you galvanized like a frog's leg to a D-cell battery. And if anything does intrude, some sound outside, a dog barking or some distant siren, it will not disturb you.

Starting at the top of your head picture a column of light creating a small, round, warm spot at the crown of your head. Feel the warmth and relax the nerves and muscles in your scalp. Let this circle of comfort and relaxation expand to the size of the palm of your hand, growing to reach your temples, your forehead, and the back of your head.

Imagine a small lawn tractor the size of your thumb, or a toy bulldozer, or a little tank making wide circles around your scalp. Its little treads massaging your skin so that your whole scalp is infused with circulation, warmer and more relaxed. Recognize how much tension you carry around your ears, temples, and the back of your head, and release this tension as if you were letting down the curtains.

This little tractor motors across your forehead, and beneath its little treads all sorts of concerns and anxieties are erased, cutting you off in mid-sentence stuttering of vigilance, activity, and concerns of all sorts. Like a masseuse pressing their heel down the sides of your spine, the tension is flattened like cookie dough beneath a rolling pin. The words and complaints just smushed flat into a guttural exhale, an “ahhhh...” before a wave of relaxation.

Let this little tractor ride into your eye sockets, massaging the muscles behind eyes that we guard so carefully, letting those eyes loll in their sockets, rolling around comfortably, not really looking for or at anything, just seeing the world go past, circling the sky on some slow amusement park ride.

Then around the base of your skull, the hinge of your jaw, and across your teeth, and lips. These too we guard with some fears of injury, and release that fear and release that tension held in your jaw, and teeth, and the muscles around your lips. As if your face itself was a mask held in place by hundreds of rubber bands now relaxed, letting your face go limp like pizza dough, flapped and shaken into a glutinous elastic, folded up and set in a jar by the door.

Let your tongue settle, wider, warmer, softer. Let your jaw drop a little toward your chest, and your head bow toward the safe and comfortable space before you. Release the tension in your face and in the back of your neck. And as you take a deep breath release your sinuses as your breath perforates your passages, channeled like steam or mist down past your palate, throat, esophagus, and into your lungs.

This relaxation is simple, it's just letting your body function naturally. You unlock the tensions in and around your chest so that your breath inflates thoroughly, evenly, and deeply beneath your sternum, below your ribs, extending broadly below the muscles of your scapula, an elastic webbing that both holds everything together, and relaxes everything together, sinking into your chair, bed, sofa, armchair, hammock, carpet, moss, beach sand, floating in air, water, or space.

Now let your relaxation roll down from your neck, across your shoulders, and down your arms. And as you feel waves of relaxation notice your pulse. Maybe you feel it in your neck, chest, arms, or hands. You can feel it anywhere if you look for it, and be amazed at how absent it seems when you don't. Feel your pulse now in your hands, tolling like a metronome, and in your arms, and across your breast pulsing above the gentler waves of breath that expand, flowing to fill, and then pause, ebb and slack.

Scan for tension in your torso, chest, back, spine, neck and shoulders. Tension appears as blankness, coldness, solidity, rigidity, or a furrowing, folding, inflexibility, or contraction.

It's amazing we have such poor language for tension, and such limited means of describing relaxation. Amazing that we have such a poor understanding of what comfort feels like, but so it is: we have no description because we have no understanding, and this is true in any language. The fault is not in our words but in our lack of awareness. This is the real object here: awareness. A perception beyond language. A body memory.

If you find some tension, and even if you don't, call back that little tractor that rumbled around your scalp and direct it to those places. Let that tractor tread back and forth over the tight spots, and if the tension is deep, then let that little tractor set its drill rig and burrow its auger into muscle, twisting and twirling the muscles as if it was stretching taffy, until that spot is loose and limp.

Focus on your hips, pelvis, sacrum, and the base of your spine. This is a place of special tensions because of the weight it carries, both as the superstructure of our posture as well as the cradle of our organs. And here too attach the big muscles of our buttocks and thighs, connected to the big joints of our knees, laced and cross braced with tendons and ligaments quite a bit more vulnerable to injury than you might suspect.

Like some towering scaffold the spine is connected to the muscles of the hips and femurs, and the big bones sit atop each other, cushioned by cartilage, meniscus, and connective tissues. These too need to be relaxed. The whole complex: spine, hips, pelvic floor, thighs, knees, and calves. Bring that toy tractor down to excavate the situation, to police the interior and separate the muscles down the outside of your thighs, letting our knees spread a little, as a little warmth glows your shins, down to your ankles.

Feel the pulse in your legs. I feel it first in my thighs, but then I feel it around my thighs, and it extends down like a spear through my knees, and a whisper around my calves. I don't know about you, but I carry a lot of tension in my ankles, they seem to be made of metal, as if they were artificial joints. They feel sturdy and, indeed, I have never injured them in spite of many assaults. Perhaps yours feel more vulnerable, more like a pitchfork militia and less like an Imperial Star Cruiser. However you feel, let the pulse carry through your ankles to your feet, whether the joints pulse actively or simply resonate with the pulse around them. Move down to your feet.

Picture those foot rollers, cylindrical ridged wooden rolling pins you roll beneath your feet. Imagine them rolling under the arches of each foot, loosening the muscles in the arches and tickling the balls of your feet.

Let that little massage tractor go to work on your feet, the heels, the sides, the balls, the arches. Feel those little rolling treads forward and reversing over and around your feet, around each toe, and back up your Achilles tendons.

Pushing against the joints of your feet, the knuckles of your toes, feel the nerves following the tendons like upside down tree roots weaving around your ankles, up your shins, carrying the energies of balance, direction, and support up into the massive joints of your knees.

Feel the lighter energy coming down your legs, swaddling your feet, and launching out your toes to create roots of energy into the ground around you. Connecting your relaxation to a stability rooted in the earth itself, real roots that kept you always connected to the ground.

Now with each breath feel a warm sensation roll over you from head to foot, leaving a kind of tingling, more or less, in the looser sense of body, always ready to call the little massage tractor to explore the tensions you carry. Feel yourself as the liquid that you are, percolating like water through the rocks, always moving energy, nutrients, plasma, antibodies, and who knows what!

At any point you focus -- calf, hip, gut, back, hand, shoulder, neck, ear or eye -- feel the natural connection, energy and relaxation flowing through you like a river. You are a river of relaxation, waves of all heights, sounds, and frequencies all passing through you without a sound. A turbulent concoction of attentions and emotions, all let go, all swept away, all released and relaxed. A million colored papers, all cut and mixed up like confetti, and you don't need to think about any of them. You don't need to do anything but breath,... inhale,... and exhale,... letting feelings float past,... feeling clear, careless, thoughtless, and relaxed.

Let's do the count again now, and let's see if you find yourself moving into a different place as the numbers fade away. I will speak the numbers counting down from 100, and you will whisper beneath your breath "deeply relaxed" between each number that I count. And I'll go on for a while, until I feel the whole thing fading away.

I begin by saying "100," and now you say, "deeply relaxed." Then I say "99", and you say "deeply relaxed." And we go on...

98
97
96
95
94
93
92
91
90

Let these numbers float like sensations on your skin.

89, 88

Shift your focus to the sensations beneath your skin.

87, 86

A quieter, and more connected world. A world of shadows and currents that we can't see clearly because we have no clear memories, we are not focusing, and we're not thinking clearly. And without focus you become calm, because you spread out... and move into softer feelings.

Now let part of your mind come back, and let part of your mind stay there, like a scout, like a sentry, leaving a benchmark. Let part of you remain to remember for next time where feeling relaxed is, so that it won't take any effort to find your way back, when you want to function well, without tension, with room to focus. Moving toward sleep.

(wait 30 seconds)

And this is the end of this exercise. Return to awareness or go further in this state, as you prefer.

In this chapter I've invited you to relax your body, to believe that a relaxed body is a place of comfort, shelter, and safety. You'll believe it or you won't, and most likely you won't know which it is, as it is some of both. We have grown so accustomed to carrying our armour that we don't know we have it.

The relaxed man sits down to pause, reflect, and rest a while, but never bothers to set down the filing cabinet he carries on his back. How can he? It's not separate, it's part of him. He would not be who he is without it. And so we too carry as part of ourselves the very things that prevent us from changing.

In the next chapter, the Relaxation of Mind, we'll consider the other angle. The angle that perhaps by relaxing your mind you can allow yourself to be different and, at least for a while, put down that filing cabinet reminding you of all the things you must be,... if you can just find the folder which describes everything, which you can never find!

The cosmic truth is that the filing cabinet is a chaotic mess, crazy stacks of old newspapers and report cards, books you'll never read, buttons, used matches, or nothing at all. We call it "armor" because it protects us, but it offers no opportunity. We build and carry our filing cabinets in our bodies, in our minds, and in our genes. Eventually this legacy crushes the life out of us. It offers

no way forward. You can put it down, never look back, and be better for it. And that's what heaven is: a place without filing cabinets.