

Skills guide:

Find your way into physiological rest

Many people feel restless or uncomfortable trying to relax in the beginning, but physiological rest doesn't have to mean lying completely still and doing nothing.

When we learn how to be comfortable in relaxation, our body will start to automatically settle into this state more and more throughout the day, and we can find it in many daily activities.

What is Physiological Rest?

Physiological rest is the bodily state where healing, restoration and repair naturally happen. Bodily relaxation is not exactly the same thing as just lying still. If the mind is overstimulated, anxious or dissociated, then we won't be able to enter physiological rest, even if we are under the duvet all day.

Instead, physiological relaxation is about finding ways to shift the regulation of the body from the Sympathetic Nervous System to the Parasympathetic Nervous System (SNS→PNS). You can tell this shift has happened because the breath becomes gentle and even and naturally slows down. When you notice this happening, you can be sure that the Parasympathetic (rest and repair) branch of the Autonomic Nervous System is activated and in the driver's seat.

Design your own **physiological rest**:

1. Shake off restless energy



If you are restless, shake off any tension

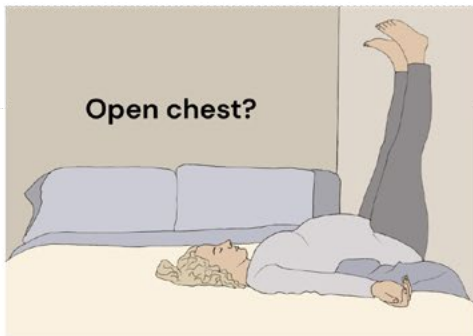
2. Prepare the space



Find a space where you can be safe, comfortable and undisturbed

3. Choose your Posture

Legs higher than heart?



Open chest?

Body supported and can let go

4. Choose your Anchor



The breath passing the nostrils?

Sensations of the hands touching?

Sounds, soft music?

5. Quieten thoughts



Gently tune in with your anchor. Allow space to come between thoughts.

6. Let the breath settle

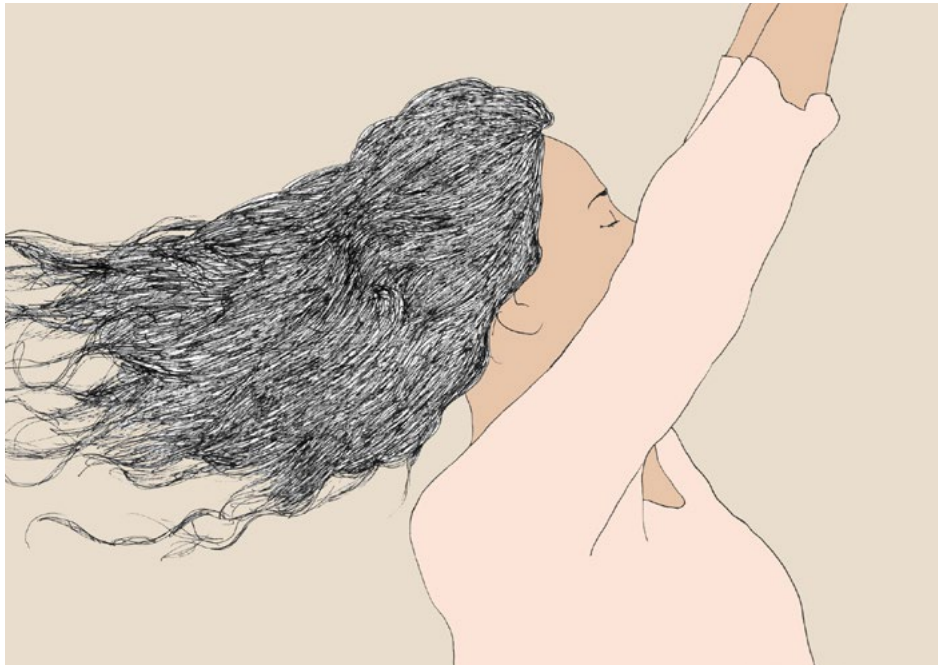


Once the breath has slowed down, that's it! There is nothing more you need to do except stay and enjoy each taste of relaxation.

Instructions:

There are different ways into physiological rest and different approaches will work for different people. Customize the following 6 components to find a way that works for you.

Stage 1. Deal with any blocks to relaxation



Around half of people find their ability to relax blocked.

Common Block 1: there is a high level of restlessness in the body.

Very restless people usually find it helpful to move the body physically before they try to rest. For example, shaking the body is an effective approach that can be done safely anywhere. As shaking the body switches the SNS down immediately, it can be done right before you plan to rest.

You may prefer to go for a run, dance etc. before you settle into physiological rest.

Common Block 2: the ability to relax is blocked by a self-critical mind.

If you have an inner dialogue that just doesn't give you a break, and tends to be judgmental or critical when you try to relax, then learning to speak to yourself with kindness and care will be key to entering physiological rest.



One approach is to imagine the critical part of your mind as a character with their own voice. You can give it a name. This helps you empathise with your self-critical parts, but also find some distance from them. You may notice that the critical voice has similar opinions or tone to a critical parent, or caregiver.

In the same way you can identify parts of yourself which are kinder and more encouraging, and allow these voices more airtime. Gently placing a hand on the heart can help connect you with these caring parts.

Try this: If you notice self-critical thoughts, thank your critical voice for trying to look out for you, and gently remind it that, at this moment, you are safe, taking care of yourself and that bullying/judgement/analysis is not needed.

Stage 2. Prepare the space



Identify a place where you feel safe and can be comfortable. This can be a corner of your home, for example. Keep the space tidy, make it beautiful and fill it with nice smells and cushions or blankets. Remove any distractions (phones and screens). This place is for you, set it aside for rest.

If you live with other people (for example children) you may need to put some boundaries in place, that they do not disturb you in your place of rest.

Although it helps, you don't need a physical sanctuary to enter physiological rest. If this feels out of reach, or you are not at home, you can also close your eyes and visualize a restful place. For example a warm beach, or a peaceful forest.

Stage 3. The posture of the body

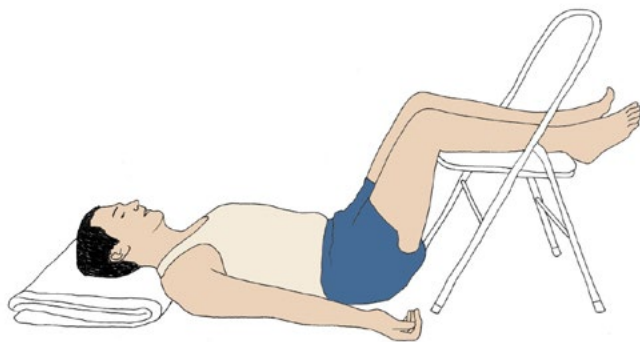
Certain postures naturally support the body to find physiological rest, by activating the parasympathetic nervous system directly.

1. Postures where more of the body is above the level of the heart

The vagus nerve (the most important nerve in the PNS) is directly activated when there is a strong flow of blood into the heart. Gravity can help with this. **Lying on your back with your legs resting up the wall or raised on a chair** is effective and comfortable for most people. In these postures the blood in the legs flows into the heart.



Legs up the wall



Legs raised on chair

Inversions (upside down yoga poses) can also be adapted for most people, and can be very effective ways to shift the body into physiological rest. **Chair Supported Sarvangasana** (shoulder-stand) is a good restorative inversion, for those with more mobility.



Chair Supported Sarvangasana

2. Postures that help the chest open

An open chest, where we can breathe deeply and freely, also supports the vagus nerve and helps the body settle into physiological rest.

Lying back with shoulder-blades propped by a bolster or cushions, so the top of the arms relax either-side freely in gravity, supports an open chest.



You can find instructions to get into these postures by searching Youtube. Remember to go at your own pace. If you lack confidence, you might want the support of someone else, the first few times you try.

3. Special considerations – stiffness and trauma

When finding postures for the body to settle in, it is important to be comfortable. If you are very stiff, you may need to adapt the postures to suit your body. **For example, you can support the body with props, such as rolled towels, folded blankets, and cushions.**

If you have strong trauma memories in the body, some positions might feel too open. Your body may need a very safe position to feel comfortable resting at first.



Supported Child's Pose

People who have trauma stored in the body, or stress systems on high alert, often find **soft weights helpful on the eyes and body.** (Such as a sand-bag, bolster, or weighted blanket).



Soft Weight on body

4. Choose an anchor

Definition: An anchor is something that you can pay attention to that ties you with the present moment.



Many people find watching the breath is the most natural way to anchor in the present moment. The breath is dynamic, it moves, and has many sensory components that you can anchor in on. For example, you can observe the temperature of the stream of air passing the nostrils vs. the rise and fall of the chest.

*However, if it makes you anxious to watch the breath, or you notice you cannot help controlling the breath in a way that makes you feel tense, it is best to choose an **alternative anchor**.*

Alternative options for anchors include:

- **Sounds around you**

Put on music, white or brown noise, or tune into natural sounds like rain.

- **Sensations of gravity or touch**

Moving your mind to where the weight of the body meets the earth (or whatever surface you are lying or sitting on) can be an effective anchor.

If connecting with the weight of the body is difficult for you, you can turn this upside down by focusing on the power and solidity of the earth supporting and holding you. Another option is to focus on a particular part of the body that does not trigger anxiety, such as the hands lying in the lap or the feet against the floor.

- **Calming, grounding smells.**

Many people find earthy smells like sage or lavender are helpful anchors. You can get a small bottle of essential oils quite cheaply from most health stores. Alternatively pick and dry herbs from the garden, or light a candle or incense.

5. Quieten thoughts

When we are caught up in thoughts, it is much harder to enter physiological rest.

Thoughts will not miraculously disappear, so instead we can find some **ways to allow more space between thoughts**. Some options include:

- Know that **thoughts generate more thoughts**.
- When you notice you are thinking, **label the thought 'thought'**, then gently bring the attention back to your anchor.
- Try picturing **thoughts** pinned to clouds **floating** past, or on giant leaves **floating** down a river.
- Replace thoughts with a **mantra, affirmation or prayer**.
- A very simple example is, **'I notice I am breathing in, I notice I am breathing out.'** (Repeat)



6. Settle into relaxation

Once the breath has slowed down, that's it! There is nothing more you need to do except stay and settle deeper. Whatever feeling comes up, let it be. Try not to get caught up in thoughts telling you there are other things you need to be doing. There is no need to repeat instructions to yourself or try really hard to get the exercise right. Instead, try and stay with the feelings of the body and enjoy each taste of relaxation.

As you relax, you will become more present and grounded in the body. You might discover sensitive and painful areas. If this happens, don't panic, but try to find an attitude of gentle curiosity. Remaining quiet and calm, learn to sink into any feeling. Breathe into the sensation; then exhale slowly and gently and relax the painful or contracted area.

If it is difficult to stay, set a timer, start with 5 minutes, and gradually increase the amount of time you practice for.



You must practice entering physiological rest regularly if you want it to become your body's autopilot. How about building physiological rest into your bedtime routine? The benefits of physiological rest might feel subtle at first, but they will build as the PNS gets toned and sleep improves.

Bodysymptoms.

Maria R's Experience

"It took me a long time to find a type of meditation that worked for me, as my head is running thoughts all the time. I'm not very good at staying focused by just listening without visual input, so guided meditations just didn't really work. The only type that has worked for me has been chanting mantras from my yoga classes. It can most easily be described as chanting the same phrase over and over again. It was just enough stimulation for my brain, to keep my thoughts from running elsewhere, but at the same time so simple to do that it can just run on autopilot."

