“Relax the body, relax the mind”

When your emotions appear to take over and your body sensations start to feel out of your control, it can seem impossible to just tell yourself to “just relax” and let that tension go. But you can learn four simple techniques to relax your body, and your mind will follow. Luckily, they can be done anywhere, and the more you practice – the more regulated you will be.

* *Relax your jaw, shoulders and wrists.* Do you feel a little tension - maybe even an ache - at the hinge of your jaw?  Relax those muscles.  Open your mouth slightly.  Gently feel the tip of your tongue curl just a little towards the roof of your mouth.  With practice, you should feel a soft breath escape you as you do that and the conscious relaxation will send a release through the muscles in your whole upper body.

Now pay attention to the spot at the base of your skull and the center of your shoulder blades.  With your jaw still relaxed, drop your shoulders just slightly.  Can you feel that spot release its tension?  Now think about your wrists.  Relax your hands.  Feel warmth flow into them.

*(Tip:*If you're having trouble releasing the muscles, start by tensing them.  Clench your jaw and then release it.  Tighten the muscles and then let them go.  With practice you'll be able to go directly into relax.)

* *Cleansing breaths.*Breathing is essential to all relaxation techniques.  Breathe from your stomach, not from your chest.  As your stomach expands, you'll feel your ribs move up and down as your diaphragm drops and your lungs expand.  Generally, one long full breath followed by consciously slower breathing will slow your heartrate.  As you breathe, continue to feel your shoulder and neck muscles relax.
* *Puff.*Still tense?  Puff out your cheeks.  It relaxes all your facial muscles and forces you to take big breath from your stomach.  This works particularly well if you're in pain or you're so tense you can't concentrate and aren't able to relax and breathe slowly yet.  After puffing your cheeks and letting out that quick breath, your tongue should naturally rise to the roof of your mouth, relaxing your jaws.  FEEL that relaxation. That's what you're trying to hold and maintain.
* *Rinse.*When you notice that physical or emotional pressure piling on, it can be really helpful to wash your hands. Washing your hands in warm water - particularly letting warm water flow over your wrists - slows your heart.  Why?  Tension reduces circulation to your periphery and focuses it on your core and brain.  That's why your hands get cold.  Warming your hands relaxes the arteries in your wrist, increases circulation, and slows your heart.  Just like slower breathing.  Feel that relaxation flowing from your hands through your shoulders and up to your jaw.

Learning to relax on the go can help in the short term when you feel that rise in emotion intensity and help you focus on what you need to do next.  The more your practice them, the more effective they become.  Doing them often is one of the best habits to cultivate to reduce stress in your life.

(adapted from Dr. Nancy Darling, PhD)