



To calm your anxiety, consider kava. This popular herb relaxes skeletal muscles without depressing the central nervous system, leaving you calm yet alert. In studies it has been shown to work almost as well at quelling anxiety as tranquilizers and anxiety-reducing medications. Take no more than 250 mg a day. Don't take kava for more than three months without consulting your doctor. Prolonged use increases the chance of side effects such as stomach upset. And don't take kava if you plan to drive, since it may slow your reflexes.

4 When other thoughts enter your mind, simply redirect your attention to your word or phrase. This might be difficult at first, but as you become more adept at meditating, you'll be better able to clear your mind of all distractions.

## Deep Breathing

Another way to elicit the relaxation response is to focus on your breathing. During times of stress, we tend to take short, shallow breaths, filling only the upper chest with oxygen. Children, on the other hand, instinctively fill their lungs completely by breathing from their abdomens in what's called deep, or diaphragmatic, breathing.

Deep breathing not only increases your oxygen intake but also helps reduce tension and encourages a state of relaxed alertness. Practice this technique once a day.

- 1 Lie on your back with your feet slightly apart.
- 2 Breathe in slowly through your nose. (This filters and warms the air before it enters your lungs.) Keep the tip of your tongue gently touching the roof of your mouth throughout this exercise. If your nose is congested, inhale through your mouth, slightly opened.
- 3 Count to four as you inhale, imagining the warm air moving deep into your lungs. Make sure that your abdomen—not your chest—expands as your lungs fill with air. Your shoulders shouldn't move.
- 4 Hold the breath as you count to four again, slowly.
- 5 Exhale slowly with a whoosh of sound, again to the count of four, imagining any tension moving out

with the air. Contract your stomach muscles to push all the air out of your lungs. Notice your abdomen fall.

6 Pause a second or two, then repeat. As you become more relaxed you may find that you can increase your counts effortlessly, going up to a count of eight.

## Visualization

The imagination is a powerful tool. Athletes use it to enhance their performance by "seeing" themselves execute the perfect high jump, triple axle, or jump shot before they actually do it. Along the same lines, if you picture yourself calm and in control, your body will respond in kind. Studies have shown that visualization can lessen anxiety and even ease pain. Here is one simple visualization exercise you can practice daily or whenever you feel stress start to tighten its grip.

- 1 Take a few deep breaths as described in the deep breathing exercise at left.
- 2 Now picture a peaceful scene. It might be a meadow, a lake, a mountaintop, the beach, or any place where you feel calm.
- 3 Immerse yourself in every aspect of the scene. For example, imagine the color of the grass or water, the feel of the warm or cool air on your face, the smell of the salty ocean or pine trees or wildflowers, the chirp of the birds, or the rhythmic crash of the waves. Let these details absorb your full attention for about 5 or 10 minutes. Notice that your breathing is now slower and more regular. When you're ready to disengage, simply allow the image to slowly fade away.