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Surgery Stress Relief Techniques

Heal More Quickly and Stress Less When Undergoing Surgery

By [Elizabeth Scott, M.S.](#), About.com Guide Updated June 04, 2009

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Having surgery can bring a lot of stress. Aside from worrying about potential complications, even minor surgery (if there is such a thing) involves risk and requires recovery time.

Those who need surgery are often facing stress in other areas of life as well; usually, there's a [health condition](#) that necessitates the surgery, and perhaps [financial stress](#) involved with the hospital and doctor bills. It's already pretty clear that surgery and related health events can lead to additional stress. But did you know that the stress surrounding surgery can actually impact health outcomes? Or, in more optimistic language, stress relief before and after surgery can improve health outcomes?

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Recent research by The University of Texas M. D. Anderson Cancer Center studied groups of men facing surgery for early-stage prostate cancer. (Because there's a lot of stress surrounding possible complications from prostate surgery, this was a good group to study for stress.) They divided the men into two groups: those who received stress management training from a therapist, and those who experienced general 'talk therapy' from the same therapist. (More specifically, the men in both groups received two 60-90 minute sessions of either stress management training or 'supportive attention', and a booster session prior to surgery.) A third group of men received no intervention. It found that men who participated in the sessions experienced less short-term mood disturbance and better long-term quality of life, compared to patients who had the procedure

but did not have any behavioral intervention.

All men were assessed before the sessions, one month before, one week before, and the morning of surgery, as well as six weeks, six and 12 months following surgery, and it was found that the men who received stress management training prior to surgery reported a higher level of physical functioning and aspects of quality of life than patients in the other two cohorts. (Those who received standard therapy still fared better than those who had no intervention at all.)

This study underscores an increasingly-researched connection between the mind and the body that stress management experts have long known: our emotional state can affect our physical state. Other studies on immunity and wound healing have also demonstrated the physical effects of stress.

So what types of stress management techniques were those men taught? They learned simple techniques to combat surgery stress, techniques that virtually anyone can learn and use for their own surgery stress. They included the following.

Diaphragmic Breathing

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Stress-relieving breathing exercises are an excellent way to quickly relax and reverse your body's stress response. They can be used in virtually any situation,

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so they're an excellent 'first line of defense' against stress and its effects; breathing exercises can help with surgery stress because they can help halt or reverse the physiological changes that can lead to lowered immunity and slower healing.

[Read more about breathing exercises for stress relief.](#)

Relaxing Guided Imagery

Guided imagery can help with relaxation by getting you 'used to' a new and potentially scary situation while you're in a relaxed state, so it's familiar and associated with calm emotions when experienced in real life (which is why it's often used as part of Stress Inoculation Training). The men in this group were exposed to an imagery experience of the day of surgery - all the sounds and sensations from pre-op, to the recovery room, to coming out of anesthesia - while they were in a relaxed state.

[Read more about guided imagery for stress relief.](#)

Cognitive Therapy

Many aspects of a stressful experience originate in the mind: what you think of as stressful is experienced as stressful. Feeling out of control, not knowing what to expect, and negative ways of thinking can all create stress, or exacerbate stress that's already felt. Cognitive therapy can combat these aspects of stress that contain a cognitive component, so it was included as part of the stress management training for these men. Specifically, they were taught cognitive skills to work with negative thinking, and realistic expectations - so that patients could better manage any unexpected side effects during their recovery or difficulty healing.

[Read more about cognitive therapy.](#)

For many reasons, surgery can be a stressful event, but the stressors involved can be managed to reduce surgery stress and speed healing.

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