**Cue-Controlled Relaxation**

This Science-Backed Technique Kills Anxiety and Stress Using Just a Word
Research shows cue-controlled relaxation is a great way to calm an anxious mind.
Can you reduce your own stress and anxiety by saying just one word? You can--and there's scientific research that shows how it works.
That insight comes from Marina Harris, Ph.D., a sports psychologist at North Carolina State University and a former competitive gymnast who retired from the sport due to an injury. In an article at Psychology Today, Harris described how she struggled with anxious thoughts herself, until she discovered cue-controlled relaxation. Cue controlled-relaxation is a technique that pairs a calming relaxation exercise with a specific cue, such as a word or phrase, until one evokes the other in a conditioned response. If the mere smell of coffee brewing in the morning makes you feel more alert, that could be an example of a conditioned response you've already learned.
The cue-controlled relaxation technique Harris used has been shown in experiments to help people with anxiety around things like taking tests or going to the dentist. It's so logical that it seems bound to work and so simple that I'm planning to try it myself. Here's how:
1. Pick a word you like.
It should be a word that evokes calmness and relaxation for you. Harris used the word "settle." One of the experiment subjects used the word "calm." I might use the phrase "just this," which I frequently use for meditation, so it's already associated with calming thoughts in my mind. Whatever word you choose, make sure it's one you like because you'll be saying it to yourself quite a lot.
2. Find a relaxation technique that works for you.
One of the easiest and most effective techniques is to control and slow your breathing, which will automatically lower your heart rate, especially if you make your exhalations longer than your inhalations. My favorite way to do this is something called 4-7-8 breathing, which I learned a few years ago. I use it whenever I have trouble falling asleep and it often puts me to sleep right away. The basic idea is to breathe in for a count of four, hold your breath for a count of seven, and then breathe out for a count of eight. Repeat for a total of four times.
If that seems too complicated, there's a simpler version called box breathing, invented by a Navy SEAL. You inhale for a count of four, hold your breath for four, exhale for four, and then hold your breath again (with your lungs empty) for four. Whatever breath technique you use, repeat your cue word, either out loud or inside your head, every time you breathe out. As you do so, relax your muscles, including your jaw and face, as much as you can.
Do this at least once a day, preferably more often. Keep practicing for at least several days.
3. Make it shorter.
Once you've practiced your relaxation technique along with your word for a while and you feel confident that you can make yourself relax this way, it's time to start shortening your relaxation sessions. Harris says you should begin by making your sessions one minute shorter than they were before. Make sure your technique still works for you in this smaller amount of time. If it doesn't, keep practicing it, along with your word, until it does work. Once you're confident that you can relax yourself this way, shorten the practice by another minute, and again keep at it until you're sure this shorter session still works for you.
Keep whittling it down in this way until you're down to a single minute, still saying your word. Then keep going till you've got it down to a single word paired with a single breath. By the end of the process, simply repeating your word, either out loud or to yourself, should be enough to reduce your anxiety, fight stress, and help you with things like pre-presentation jitters.