

SINGING BOWLS FOR RELAXATION

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CHAPTER 1

BARRIERS TO RELAXATION

“Each one of us needs to find that special person or thing that provides the necessary moments for calm, for stress reduction, for motivation, and for inspiration. Your time to find that special vehicle is now; you never know when you’ll need a little bit of comfort and relaxation.”

Catherine Pulsifer

The concept of relaxation is so familiar that many of us take it for granted. Information about relaxation is everywhere. Whether it’s an ad for a spa day, an article on the internet, a news story about stress and overwork, or countless other sources, relaxation is considered by most people to be a vital part of daily life.

Because it’s such a commonplace concept, it’s easy to forget about the importance of relaxation for health and wellbeing. We must also be warned against getting into habits that don’t promote real relaxation.

A survey by Dr. Megan Arroll found that 46% of respondents said they struggled to 'switch off' during their downtime – including when on vacation, and during weekends or holidays. Even more concerning is the fact that 79% of Americans polled by Gallup in 2017 said they frequently feel stressed.

The good news is that by welcoming a singing bowl into your life, you have in your possession a tool which can help gently guide you to greater levels of relaxation and stress reduction. Using a singing bowl specifically for relaxation can even be a fun and joyful way to find calm and serenity in a fast-paced world.

In this guide, we'll take a look at relaxation and why many people are struggling to let go on a daily basis. We'll explore how we experience stress responses from our sympathetic nervous system, and the importance of reducing stress. Then, we'll talk about how you can use your Silent Mind singing bowl to live a more harmonious lifestyle and enjoy more wellness-boosting relaxation.

So, grab your singing bowl and get ready to make it a part of your relaxing self-care routine!



WHY IS IT SO DIFFICULT TO RELAX?



For many people, relaxing is yet another thing to check off on the to-do list, and it frequently gets knocked down to the bottom of that list. For others, relaxation can feel next to impossible because of a life filled with stress, anxiety, or issues such as depression or chronic health conditions.*

Relaxing can feel like something people have to work for, in the same way they might strive to get a promotion or learn a new skill. We have this misconception that we must “earn” it. Part of this issue comes from our competitive, achievement-based “live-to-work” culture, where time off is frowned upon, and we worry about not meeting the high standards set by ourselves, our peers, and our society.

Some of the most common reasons people find it hard to relax are:

- Working such long hours that “switching off” becomes difficult.
- Financial worries and other anxieties that lead to ruminating (going over the same problem or thought again and again without resolving it).
- Difficulty sleeping and being overtired. This can be because of the vast amounts of time many of us spend with screens at work and at home, as well as poor sleep hygiene.
- Dietary issues – heavy food, processed foods, and diets high in sugar and sodium can make it hard to unwind.
- Overscheduling. Often, we don’t just have long working hours, but a whole host of other responsibilities to take care of. Childcare, chores, socializing, and much more can all eat into any downtime we have.
- Worry and anxiety about goals and productivity. Some people feel guilty or are convinced that they aren’t doing “enough” if they take time out to relax.
- Too little or too much exercise.
- A poor understanding of what relaxation involves, or what makes for a genuinely relaxing activity.



The last point is essential. Many people “relax” in ways which are not relaxing for the body and mind at all. Watching TV, spending time on social media, and drinking alcohol are all common ways people tend to “unwind”. While you may feel like you’re relaxing in the moment, these methods do not provide true, restorative relaxation in the long term.

When it comes to TV, we still watch a lot of it. The average American spends two hours and 45 minutes watching TV each day, according to Pew Research. And it is not that effective for encouraging relaxation. Here’s why.

Although certain areas of your brain such as the neocortex (used for analysis and reasoning) tend to “zone out” while watching TV, other regions of the brain, such as the visual cortex, become highly stimulated. This leaves your brain in an in-between state where your mind is taking in a lot of new information but is not truly processing it. This means you are not fully relaxed, but you are also not fully engaged with what’s happening.

Additionally, many of the programs on TV these days can produce either a heightened stress response because of their high-octane action or violence, or can add to feelings of negative self-worth when you compare yourself to people or situations being portrayed.

These issues can be compounded by spending hours on the internet, including social media websites. Not only are they found to decrease feelings of self-worth, but spending hours looking at a screen with a blue light can also make it difficult to relax. That's because blue light suppresses the production of melatonin, which is essential for good sleep.

With all these factors, it's no wonder that people find it hard to relax! Not only do many people spend most of their "active" time on the go, but the activities they choose to relax with are not relaxing at all.

So, what does real relaxation look like, and how is it achieved? To answer that we need to look at an important process within our body – the autonomic nervous system, and its two branches, the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system.



YOUR PARASYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEM – THE KEY TO RELAXATION

You've no doubt heard of the fight-flight-freeze response, which activates when we experience stress. This is a handy way to ensure that in survival situations you are able to respond quickly to a threat. It's probable that this complex response system evolved as we did, to help us respond to dangerous threats in prehistory. In these cases, the fight-flight-freeze response may well have been activated only rarely, in situations that warrant extreme stress – like being chased by a bear.

In modern times our body retains this system, and for so many, it's almost always activated. We can chalk much of this up to the pressure to stay busy. However, the extreme stress response that saved our lives ages ago really isn't a reasonable response to today's actual threat level.



The sympathetic nervous system is what activates when you feel stressed. It gets your body ready for action, so that you can physically deal with a threat. As you might expect, it works very quickly. Some of its jobs are to increase your heart rate, contract muscles, dilate the bronchial tubes in your lungs, and briefly stop many digestive functions. If you're chronically stressed, this response will remain activated.

The effects of remaining stuck in such a state are evident when we experience issues with digestion, poor sleep, hormonal imbalances, and problems with our heart or other organs. This is why stress is now known to be a contributing factor toward many diseases.

In contrast to the stress-response cascade that occurs in your body when the sympathetic nervous system is activated, are the responses created by the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS). This system is much slower and moves along different neural pathways in your brain. It helps to make a number of changes in your body such as decreasing your heart rate, increasing your saliva, relaxing your muscles, and releasing digestive enzymes. These changes help to switch your body into a natural healing mode. In contrast to being in "fight or flight," it's often referred to as "rest and digest" mode.

The less time you spend in a sympathetic nervous system response, and the more you can spend in a parasympathetic one, the better placed your body is to recover from the effects of long-term stress. This can be achieved through relaxation. Although relaxation on its own is not the only factor that will help to bring you back into balance (especially if you have suffered from long-term chronic stress), it will help – as long as it is truly relaxing!

True relaxation is, therefore, any activity that engages your PNS, and results in the physiological changes it provides. This means being able to comfortably slow down, breathe deeply, and allowing your mind to be engaged without attachment or worry.

In chapters three and four, we'll discuss how singing bowls help you relax, and how you can use your singing bowl to help you enter this calming and healing natural state. But first, let's take a closer look at how stress impacts you and why it's important to reduce it.



** Please note that, if this is the case for you, and you are suffering from a physical or mental health condition, you should consult your physician or relevant professional, and take their advice and guidance. While we are exploring some information about the benefits of relaxation, this is not medical advice or a replacement for your regular treatment.*



CHAPTER 2

THE IMPORTANCE OF REDUCING STRESS

As we've just learned, a stress reaction is your body's natural way of dealing with a threat. Because of this, we know that not all stress should be considered "bad". In fact, some stress might be good for us. When your sympathetic nervous system kicks in to respond to a little short-term stress, the process can provide benefits which boost your immune system response.

When you have "good," positive stress – such as the stress you might feel when meeting an important deadline, or taking on any challenging but rewarding activity – your body triggers the dopamine reward center in your brain. This makes you to feel good, maybe even exhilarated.

Stress can motivate you, letting you respond quickly to tricky tasks, and giving you access to the energy you need to overcome challenges. The problem arises when your sympathetic nervous system remains activated, locking you into a stressful state. This kind of long-term stress can cause a range of health issues.

HOW DOES CHRONIC STRESS AFFECT THE BODY?

Researchers from Carnegie Mellon University found that chronic psychological stress – the kind many of us are exposed to thanks to work, financial pressures, and poor diet and sleep – is linked to the body losing its natural ability to regulate the inflammatory response.

Sheldon Cohen, the Robert E. Doherty Professor of Psychology at CMU, says -

“Inflammation is partly regulated by the hormone cortisol, and when cortisol is not allowed to serve this function, inflammation can get out of control.”

Reducing inflammation is important because when it gets out of control, it can promote the development and progression of many diseases. Research by Cohen has shown that people who are suffering from psychological stress are more susceptible to developing colds. He found that experiencing a prolonged stressful event was associated with the inability of immune cells to respond to hormonal signals that would normally regulate the inflammatory response.

While colds are never fun to experience, the bad news doesn't stop there. A study of more than 2,000 people by Sudha Seshadri was published in the journal *Neurology* in 2018. Seshadri is a Professor of Neurology who works at Boston University and The University of Texas. Seshadri found that:

“Those with the highest levels of the stress-related hormone cortisol performed worse on tests of memory, organization, visual perception and attention.”

Higher cortisol levels, measured in subjects' blood, were also found to be associated with physical changes in the brain that are often seen as precursors to Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia.”



Other publications, such as the Harvard Health Review, summarize research which indicates that chronic stress also contributes to high blood pressure, the formation of artery-clogging deposits, and even causes brain changes that could be linked to depression, anxiety, and addiction. Some research suggests that chronic stress may contribute to obesity by causing people to eat more as a response to stress, and causes issues with decreasing sleep and exercise. Inflammation is also linked to processes that can lead to strokes, angina, and heart attacks.

MAST CELLS AND STRESS

You might not have heard of mast cells before, but these little cells are thought to play a role in the development of inflammatory diseases. They are a type of immune cell which release histamines in response to allergens like pollen, dust mites, or peanuts, in order to help the body get rid of these allergens. This is what triggers a reaction like a runny nose, watery eyes, or a constricted airway.

Crucially, however, research has found that these cells can react to psychological stress as well as allergens. Researchers at the University of Michigan found that a type of receptor called the CRF1, which is found on mast cells, is critical as to why they can behave in ways which promote inflammation.

When mast cells become activated in response to a stressful situation, the CRF1 receptors tell these cells to *“release chemical substances which can lead to inflammatory and allergic diseases such as irritable bowel syndrome, asthma, life-threatening food allergies and autoimmune diseases such as lupus”* (Adam Moeser, co-author of the study with the University of Michigan).

It's clear then that chronic, long-term stress plays a huge role in the development of a wide range of health issues.

Understandably, all of this might have you feeling a little stressed out! Now, let's spend the rest of this book exploring ways you can start to use your singing bowl to experience true, restorative relaxation for healing.



CHAPTER 3

HOW SINGING BOWLS INDUCE RELAXATION

So, we've got the bad news out of the way. Let's get onto the good news! Because you now have a fantastic tool that you can use to help you relax and unwind. Tibetan singing bowls are amazing for inducing relaxation.

One of the reasons they are so special is because they are a very popular tool for sound healing. This is where different frequencies are played, which lead to immune responses.

Dr. Mitchell Gaynor, a cancer specialist who worked for the Cornell Medical Center before his death in 2015, did a lot to popularize sound healing using Tibetan singing bowls. He first came across the technique while treating a Tibetan monk in 1991, and began using them to work with his cancer patients. After getting what he described as “phenomenal” results, he incorporated singing bowls into his research and practice:

"I started looking into studies on how sound can heal and transform. I found out Gregorian chants or classical music can change our brain waves to alpha and theta waves that are very relaxed.

Sound can change our immune function. After either chanting or listening to certain forms of music, your Interleukin-1 level, an index of your immune system, goes up between 12 and a half and 15 percent. Not only that, about 20 minutes after listening to this meditative type music, your immunoglobulin levels in your blood are significantly increased. There's no part of our body not affected. Even our heart rate and blood pressure are lowered with certain forms of music. So, it affects not only our soul and our spirit, but it affects us on literally a cellular and subcellular level."

Another study, published in the Journal of Music Therapy in 2001, explored the effect of relaxing music on the physiological responses of participants. They found that stress-induced increases in anxiety, heart rate, and systolic blood pressure were prevented by exposure to relaxing music.

In addition, vibroacoustic therapy – where audible sound vibrations are used to alleviate stress and invoke relaxation, was found to improve pain management by Christine E. Lynn, of the College of Nursing, Florida Atlantic University. These studies have begun to show just how important sound is for relaxation, wellbeing and promoting healing.



WHY DOES SOUND THERAPY WORK?

Sound therapy is thought to be so effective because it can help alter the pattern of your brainwaves. We have four main brainwave states – Beta, Alpha, Theta and Delta. Each of these has a number of cycles per second, which we measure as Hertz (Hz).

Beta brainwaves are your typical “day-to-day” state – you are in a Beta state when you complete most daily tasks. Theta brainwaves are the waves that occur during the lighter part of your sleep cycle when you are dreaming (such as REM sleep). Delta brainwaves occur when you are in that deep, “dead to the world” sleep.

Alpha brainwaves, however, are a frequency you meet when you relax, daydream, and use your imagination. Alpha waves also occur when you meditate or practice mindfulness.

Alpha waves were discovered in 1929 by Hans Berger, a German neurologist. He invented the EEG, and was the first to confirm the existence of electrical activity in the brain. One of the results of his discoveries was the invention of biofeedback theory. This is a technique where subjects are connected to instruments that provide feedback on physiological processes, such as brainwaves, muscle tone, and heart rate. Using the feedback given by sensors that monitor the activity of these processes, people aim to improve health and performance, and to manage thoughts, emotions, and behavior. Biofeedback is used effectively for treating headaches and migraines.

Studies of the Alpha wave state have shown that Alpha waves are great not only for relaxation, but for learning, problem solving, and increasing creativity. For example, a study by the University of North Carolina found that a low dose of 10 Hz can enhance Alpha brainwave activity and boost creativity. The study's authors believe that their research can be taken a step further and assist people with depression, who are often found to have impaired Alpha wave oscillations.



Playing your singing bowl can help you achieve this level of genuine relaxation. You can access these healing Alpha states via the sound of the bowl as it sings, and by using it as part of mindfulness and meditative practices.

Using your bowl to play can work on two levels. You can induce relaxation as you allow the tone to help transition you to an Alpha state, and you can play your bowl mindfully to reach a deeper level of calm and serenity. Best of all, singing bowls are easy to play at any time, in a variety of situations and settings.



CHAPTER 4

USING A SINGING BOWL FOR RELAXATION

So, how can you use your singing bowl in a way that helps you to relax? To begin, it's best to simply spend some time getting used to your new bowl and the tone it produces.

To use your singing bowl, sit somewhere comfortable, preferably where you won't be disturbed. Then, start to experiment with ways to play the bowl. There are two main ways you can play your singing bowl:

Striking Your Bowl. Balance the bowl in the palm of your hand, rather than gripping it with your fingers. Make sure you are relaxed and not gripping the bowl or the striker too tightly. Then let the striker hit the upper, outer rim of the bowl and listen to the tone it produces. Feel how the bowl vibrates in your palm. Play around with different strikes, from gentle taps to firm strikes. Listen to the noises and consider how they resonate with you. This act alone can produce incredibly calming and relaxing effects.

Playing the Rim of Your Bowl. Again, hold the bowl in the palm of your hand, without gripping the edges with your fingers. If you grip the edge of the bowl, you will dampen the sound, or prevent it altogether. This time, use the striker to create a note or two. Hold the striker loosely in your hand and keep your wrist soft. As the note rings out, run the striker around the rim of the bowl. How fast you go and how hard you press will impact the sound you create, but start off slowly and “catch” the note as you run the striker around the edge of the bowl. You will find that you can build the note up in volume, producing the ethereal singing sound your bowl is famous for. Try not to force the note; if you begin to hear a scraping sound, you may be pressing too hard or running the striker around the edge too quickly. Let yourself connect with the bowl and don’t worry if the note falls away or stops. Strike again and try once more. In time, you will discover the pace and pressure that works best for you.

Once you’ve got the hang of striking and playing the rim of your bowl, you can start experimenting with different ways to use it for relaxation. One of the best ways to relax is to simply find a state of “being” rather than “doing” — where you are engaged, but not striving or straining to create a note or to relax.

Take your bowl and play, paying attention to the sound. Notice how it feels in your body, as well as how your ears process it. Do you feel the vibration coming from the bowl as you hold it? If you play near your stomach or solar plexus, do you notice any changes? Playing your bowl as you move mindfully around your space can be a great way to help you relax as you carefully scan your body and where you might be holding tension or stress.

You can strike your bowl near places in your body that you feel are tense. For example, if you know that when you get nervous, you tend to clench your jaw or your stomach feels tense, gently strike or play your bowl over those areas and let the sound vibrations travel into those tense areas.



By playing your bowl in a slow, measured way, you can create a sustained relaxing tone that can help you bring you into a much more mindful state. Being mindful is one of the best ways to bring your mind and body back into a gentle awareness of self, and to produce the relaxing state you want.

Another way to help you relax could be to use your singing bowl as part of a sound bath. Sound baths tend to include several instruments such as gongs, chimes, bells, and singing bowls. You can invite others to play with you, including members of your family or friends who are interested in singing bowls. Or, you can use a pre-recorded track of a sound bath and play along with the sound. Sound bath tracks are very easy to find with a quick internet search.



MAKING YOUR SINGING BOWL PART OF YOUR RELAXATION ROUTINE

One of the reasons why many people find that they are in a near-constant state of fight-flight-freeze is that they are simply unaware that it's happening, and therefore not intentionally interrupting it. Think about it - how often do you fly from one task to the next, feeling almost constantly "on edge", before falling into bed exhausted at the end of the day?

How much could that state be altered if you regularly tended to a short, straightforward practice to remind you to relax and enjoy having some time to unwind?

By making your singing bowl part of your relaxation routine, you can create an easy way to add more peace and calm to your everyday life. You can start off small by adding a few minutes playing three times a day. Instead of looking at it as a chore, call it something pleasant like your "Me Moment." Even those few minutes can be beneficial.

Great times to play could be just after you get up in the morning, when you take a break for lunch in the middle of the day, and before you go to bed at night. If you can't take your bowl to work or find a place to play in the middle of the day, substitute this time for playing when you get in from work (or add that time to make a fourth relaxation moment).





If you think you will forget to play, set an alarm on your phone or timepiece. Then commit to playing your bowl for at least two minutes at these times, three times a day. Stick to this routine, playing regularly at the same times each day. You might be surprised when you begin releasing all of the hidden stress you were experiencing. It's common for us to become so accustomed to it, that it's almost background noise.

To make your new relaxation routine even more effective, spend some time breathing deeply before and during your playing. Even two to three minutes of breathing more mindfully can work wonders for your stress levels. The trick is to make sure the breaths you take are as slow as they are deep. Don't strain to inhale until it feels uncomfortable, but do inhale more slowly and deeply than you normally would. If you combine this practice with slow, sustained tones on your singing bowl, you can very quickly find you are in a much more relaxed frame of mind.

Of course, you don't need to stick only to these times. Using your singing bowl as a tool for a timeout whenever you feel life getting too stressful can be incredibly helpful. And, you can also use it to help you enter longer and more deeply meditative states as well. Meditation and mindfulness practices have numerous benefits, and toning down the pace of a fast-working mind is chief among these. Sitting quietly and playing your bowl for sustained periods of time while you meditate can be a very effective way to get you into a deeper state of relaxation. For more information on how you can use your singing bowl for mindfulness and meditation, please check out our handy guide [\[here\]](#).



CHAPTER 5

MORE TIPS FOR RELAXATION

One of the best things about taking the time to explore relaxation is discovering just how many ways there are to relieve your stress and find your personal sweet spot of calm. Many people think relaxing is either sitting on a meditation cushion for hours, or using distracting methods like alcohol or TV to “switch off.”

Alcohol and TV don’t work well for relaxation because they don’t produce this state. Alcohol, in particular, is a poor tool for relaxation because it merely depresses your nervous system, rather than teaching you to find a healthy way to reduce stress.

And, while it’s true that meditation can be extremely effective (and a much healthier!) way to help you relax, it’s by no means the only way. As we’ve seen, the key to true relaxation is to be lightly engaged in an activity, while also allowing your body and mind to “let go” a little so that you are in a less frenetic state.

Here are some ideas you can try to help bring even more relaxation into your life:

- Use essential oils and aromatherapy to amplify the effects of sound healing. By rubbing calming essential oils (ensure they are diluted correctly) onto your temples or other pressure points, you can create a much more relaxed state as you play your bowl. Lavender, chamomile, and rose are considered especially relaxing and soothing.
- Listen to some binaural beats. These tracks are thought to help reduce stress, promote healing, and induce relaxing brainwaves by playing different low-frequency tones. You can listen to binaural beats while doing some slow breathing exercises for even deeper relaxation.
- Use gentle exercise to help soothe frayed nerves. Yoga and other gentle forms of exercise are excellent for promoting relaxation. Often we hold a lot of tension in parts of our body like our shoulders, back, and stomach. By performing some basic, restorative yoga postures, you can release this tension and help bring your mind back to the present.
- Find and use a blue light filter for your devices. The blue light that screens such as your laptop, smartphone, and tablet emit is not helpful for either sleep or relaxation. Humans spent centuries with only amber tones from sunlight or candles to light our days and nights. This tone emits a much different frequency than the one that blue lights do. Blue light can cause disruptions in melatonin production, which is essential for good sleep and rest.

Not only that, but blue light can affect your retina and cellular anchors, leading to early onset of Advanced Macular Degeneration. Luckily, there are several free apps and products on the market that you can install on your tablet, smartphone, and other screens that will switch your screen to an amber tone. Simply search online for a “blue light filter.” Some of your devices might already have a “night mode” or color tint feature that you can also use.



- Use mindfulness to learn more about your stressors. As we've discussed, there is a difference between "good" stress and "bad" stress. But if you never slow down long enough to listen to your mind and body, how can you tell the difference? By practicing mindfulness, you can learn how to pay close attention to what's occurring within you in each moment. This will make it easier for you to recognize when you are in a detrimental, chronic stress state, so you can take steps to reduce it. Playing your singing bowl mindfully is an excellent way to incorporate it into your relaxation.
- Have some "me time" with a relaxing bath. A warm bath can help to relieve pain and to soothe a tired and overwhelmed mind. Adding in some Himalayan rock salt or Epsom salts can also help to ease muscle tension, provide essential minerals and encourage you to relax as you soak.
- Get outside. Yes, even if it's raining, cold, or you just don't feel like it! Being outside is one of the best ways to change your state of mind, especially if you can go somewhere that connects you to nature. You don't have to spend hours hill walking or driving to the beach. Just a patch of grass and some trees nearby, or a garden you can spend a few minutes in, can help you relax. For a little something extra, try taking off your shoes and socks and letting your feet connect to the earth. This practice is known as "earthing" and is believed by many people to be extremely beneficial for grounding and healing, as well as relaxing. If you can take your singing bowl outside and play amongst nature, that's even better!

- Write out your stress. If you're used to being "on the go" all the time or are always putting your own needs last, it's amazing how much stress and anxiety you can store up in your mind and body. By putting pen to paper and writing a list of what's bothering you, you can help to get those stresses out and relieve pent-up worry and agitation. If you prefer, you can burn your piece of paper once you have written out your stress. Practice letting go of the resentments and hurt that you have been clinging to. You can play your bowl after you're finished, to invite better energy in and reset your mind now that you have released some of what's been keeping you stuck in a stress response.
- Get your gratitude on. Once you've finished each busy day, it's tempting to go to bed thinking about all your tasks for the next day, or worrying about something that happened during your day. While it's a good idea to plan so you can handle any challenges you might face, it's stressful to remain locked into worrying. When you have a gratitude practice, you invite more relaxation in by focusing on all the things in your life that you love and enjoy.

Grab a pen and paper and write down three things you are grateful for at the end of each day. They can be anything you like – big or small. You can feel grateful for a family member or friend, or a beautiful song you heard. You can be grateful for yourself and how you are taking the time to care for yourself. The key here is the mindset – letting yourself feel truly grateful about all the positives in your life. You can even use your singing bowl to help you with gratitude practice by striking it as you breathe deeply and focus on the three biggest things you are grateful for.





That wraps up our primer on singing bowls for relaxation. Hopefully, you've gained a clearer understanding of what true relaxation is, how it benefits your health, and how we sometimes get in our own way. Most of all, hopefully you're more committed to making time for restorative, health-enhancing relaxation. After all, you already have the right tools - the knowledge shared here today, and a Silent Mind singing bowl.





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