Hey Alice,

What are stress balls and why do people use them?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Getting right down to your question: stress balls are those squishy, slightly-smaller-than-tennis-ball sized objects that you squeeze to decrease muscular tension. When you make a fist, with or without a stress ball in your hand, you're creating muscle tension. When you release your grip, muscular relaxation follows.

Even if you don't have a stress ball handy, try it now: make fists, squeeze a little bit, and hold for a few seconds. Okay, relax them, and feel the tension leave your hands and fingers. Wait a moment and then do the same things again; this time, breathe in when you tense your hands, and exhale when you let them relax a few seconds later. If you try this two or three times, squeeze a little harder each time as you go along.

This process is called progressive muscular relaxation (PMR). The technique involves tensing specific muscle groups and then relaxing them to create awareness of tension and relaxation. Why is it progressive? Because it proceeds through all major muscle groups, tensing and relaxing them one at a time, leading to total muscle relaxation. This exercise can flush out a huge amount of muscle tension all the way from your head down to your toes.

In addition to feeling relaxed, there are other benefits touted by this practice. Research suggests that PMR may lower your blood pressure, heart rate, and experience of pain. It can also increase your quality of sleep and your energy level, too. Though PMR is traditionally practiced in a series of 20 to 40 sessions, some amount of benefit can be reaped even in just one 20-minute session. The other good news is that this stress reduction strategy is basically a one-size-fits-most: it's low-cost, easy to learn and guide others through the practice, and is well-tolerated by many types of people ? from college students to corporate employees.

Whether they know it or not, people using stress balls are practicing what can be a very powerful stress management tool. A lot of folks are playing with their balls while in meetings, during study sessions, and on the phone. They'd probably relax even more if they took a few minutes just to tense, release, and relax other parts of their bodies, too. Here's a pro tip: though stress balls tend to be common give-away items, don't pass them up ? the relief they
can provide is priceless!

Alice!

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