

Stress balls ^[1]

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 help decrease muscular tension. Some people find that squeezing them and then releasing helps to relax tension that may be in the body. Additionally, there is evidence that they may help some groups improve their attention span. How can such a simple ball do so much? Keep reading!

The squeezing and releasing process used with stress balls is called progressive muscle relaxation (PMR). The technique involves tensing specific muscle groups and then relaxing them to create awareness of where tension and relaxation is held in the body. With the stress ball, it can be squeezed tightly to increase the tension, and then muscular tension will decrease when the grip is released. Why is it progressive? In addition to doing this with a stress ball, the tensing and releasing can be done throughout the body. 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 muscle tension all the way from the head down to the toes.

In addition to feeling relaxed, there are other benefits touted by this practice. Research suggests that PMR may lower blood pressure, heart rate, and experience of pain. It can also increase sleep quality and energy levels, too. PMR can be used regularly to help manage stress, and some stress-relieving benefits can be gained from just one 20-minute session. The other good news is that this stress reduction strategy can be effective for many types of people: it's low-cost and is easy to learn and guide others through the practice — from children to college students to corporate employees.

Looking for some stress relief of your own? 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. Then relax them, and feel the tension leave your hands and fingers. Wait a moment and then do it 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.

Whether they know it or not, people using stress balls are practicing what can be a very powerful stress management tool. Some find using them while in meetings, during study sessions, or while on the phone to be helpful. Taking the extra step to tense, release, and relax other parts of the bodies may provide even more relaxation. 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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