

Revisioning Exercises for Improving Mood During the Pandemic

As uncertainty abounds during this healthcare crisis, we at the Revisioning Center for Grief and Trauma are making available exercises that you can do at home to help improve mood. They can help decrease loneliness, anxiety, grief, sadness, fatigue, low self-worth, and apathy. These exercises activate the mirror neuron network and oxytocin. Oxytocin is the “friendship” neurotransmitter that can also boost the immune system and keep us all healthier during the pandemic.

These exercises are based on the principles of 1) mirror therapy which helps eliminate phantom limb pain, and 2) Revisioning, which employs mirror therapy to restore happiness and peace following losses and traumas. In both therapies, illusions created by a mirror trick the brain into restoring brain plasticity caused by three types of losses:

1. Loss of a limb through amputation or stroke
2. Loss of a loved one
3. Loss of identity following a major life change or trauma

Each exercise only takes a few minutes and requires a mirror and either photos or white paper and colored markers. The mirror can simply be a vanity mirror, or any other mirror large enough to see your head and chest. You should be able to hold your photo/drawing up to the mirror so that you can see your face AND photo/drawing in the mirror.

The following exercises can activate each of seven mood states associated with seven different neurotransmitters. This list is somewhat developmental in that meeting needs higher in the list can often lead to emotional needs being automatically met lower in the list. This directionality creates what we call the “healing order.”



ATTACHMENT EXERCISE – Helps increase **oxytocin** and decrease loneliness.

Requirements: Photo of a good friend from the present or past, someone who has empathy for you. If no photo is present, using the white paper and colored markers, draw this person next to you at the age you were.

Next, hold the photo or drawing up to the mirror so that in the mirror you can see yourself next to the photo/drawing. Within moments you should feel more connected and less alone.

* Music listening and playing also releases oxytocin and decreases loneliness.



CALMNESS EXERCISE – Helps increase **GABA**, another major relaxing chemical in the brain.

Requirements: Vacation photo or drawing showing a setting of relaxation. This could be your favorite vacation photo or someplace you would like to go. Show the photo “Full Screen” on your computer. With the computer (or drawing) sitting on your lap or desk, turn the screen around facing the mirror in front of you so that you can see yourself behind your relaxing scene. Notice that you feel more immersed in the relaxing scene than looking at it straight on.



EMOTIONAL REGULATION EXERCISE – Helps increase **endorphins** and relieve emotional and physical pain.

Requirements: Many of us are facing job losses, inability to socialize, or even use the gym. This exercise can help us re-find our happy identity before the pandemic hit. Take a photo of you at your peak happiness before the pandemic (months or years). Or you can draw yourself doing a fun activity from before the pandemic. Hold the photo/drawing up to a mirror in front of you. You should be able to see yourself and the photo/drawing in the mirror. Notice the feelings that arise. Before happiness ensues, some grief may arise over the loss. Be mindful of your emotions so that you let them pass through you without reacting to them. Most people feel reconnected to their pre-loss identity and happiness by the next day.



HAPPINESS EXERCISE – Helps increase **dopamine**, the pleasure chemical in the brain.

Requirements: Photo or drawing of yourself participating in a fun activity from your recent or distant past. Turn this photo/drawing around to the mirror reflecting your face and image. Happiness should appear. Relish in this joy for as long as you want.



ENERGY AND MOTIVATION EXERCISE – Helps increase **norepinephrine** and energy, and decrease procrastination.

Requirements: Find a photo or draw yourself (at any age) doing an activity which involves some energy or sustained activity like dancing, cycling, skiing, downhill skiing, roller-blading, etc). Turn it around to the mirror so that you can see the photo/drawing and your face. You should feel some increased happiness or energy. Having used this exercise clinically, clients normally feel recharged over the next few days or weeks and tend to take on tasks they had been procrastinating.



SELF-ESTEEM EXERCISE – Helps increase **serotonin** and self-worth.

Requirements: Use a photo (or drawing) of yourself when you felt important, successful, or confident. Consider times when you graduated, won an honor, achieved an award, were promoted, etc. Find a photo or draw yourself at this time of importance. Hold the phot/drawing up to the mirror and wait to begin feeling reconnected to that confidence you had in the photo/drawing.



FLOW EXERCISE – Helps increase **anandamide**, the brain chemical associated with times when you feel totally immersed or engaged in an activity, or flow.

Requirements: Consider a time in your life which was difficult for you to get through. Try to remember a fun time before that difficult time occurred. Or, this could be a place you escaped to while you were going through this difficult time. Draw yourself going back in time and playing with your younger self doing this fun activity. Hold the drawing up to the mirror and be mindful of your feelings.

For the next part of this exercise, close your eyes and consider a real or imaginal form of transportation that will take you and your younger self over, above, and beyond the difficult time without having to re-experience it (Back to the Future car, magic carpet, a jet, etc.). Imagine packing a bag of your favorite things you liked about yourself (your strengths) before this difficult time occurred. Imagine taking your journey from the past to the future, bypassing the difficult time completely and ending up in the present.

Notice your feelings. Many people experience a sense of flow that can continue for weeks or months.

Revisioning is being used at several inpatient psychiatric facilities to treat PTSD, addiction, and depression. If you have questions or comments, please contact us at the following:

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