

Relaxation

"The time to relax is when you don't have time for it."
~Attributed to both Jim Goodwin and Sydney J. Harris

Have you ever been told to "just relax?" Of course feeling relaxed would be ideal– this is why we come to get help in the first place! But anyone who has felt panic or extreme anxiety knows "just" relaxing is much easier said than done.

One set of skills used to supplement other CBT skills (such as exposure and cognitive skills) are **relaxation skills**. Relaxation skills address anxiety from the standpoint of *the body* by reducing muscle tension, slowing down breathing, and calming the mind. Relaxation skills can be structured; examples are slow diaphragmatic breathing, meditation, and yoga. Other factors, such as self-care and enjoying pleasurable activities, are also helpful to make us feel more relaxed. In this module we'll explore some of these strategies, explaining how they are used and why they work.

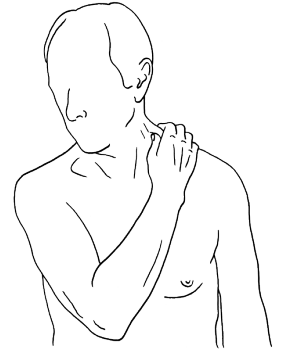
As we will emphasize in this section, relaxation skills are best used in conjunction with other CBT skills and are most effective when practiced consistently. Different skills work for different people, so the first step is to try to find the relaxation strategies that appeal to you and try them out. Enjoy!

What are relaxation exercises?

The Problem: "Somatic" Anxiety Symptoms

Most people that experience anxiety also experience unpleasant physical sensations regularly. In medical lingo, the fancy term for "physical" is *somatic*. We all know some of the most common somatic symptoms of anxiety: muscle tension, headaches, backaches, a clenched jaw, feeling keyed up, restless, and "on edge," as well as difficulty concentrating. You may remember that these symptoms are a side effect of our body's attempts to protect us; blood moves around our body and brain, into our large muscles, like our arms, legs, back, and neck, to get us ready to "fight" or to "flee." This changes the feelings in our bodies. In short the body is working hard to protect us, and these feelings are uncomfortable! Relaxation happens when the body stops trying to protect us, which helps us feel more calm and at ease.

When we experience mild to moderate levels of anxiety on a daily basis for long periods of time, we get used to this tense, jittery state, until it is hard to even know what it is like to be relaxed! In this case, we would say a person's anxiety and tension is resting, or "baseline," at a high level. The goal of these types of relaxation exercises is to change this baseline to a lower level.



Relaxation skills are like exercise!

Imagine a friend of yours telling you that she is planning to train for a 10K race. Despite the fact that she has never run a race before and does not jog regularly, she tells you her training will consist singularly of practicing running the full 10 kilometers on the day before the race. What would you think about this?

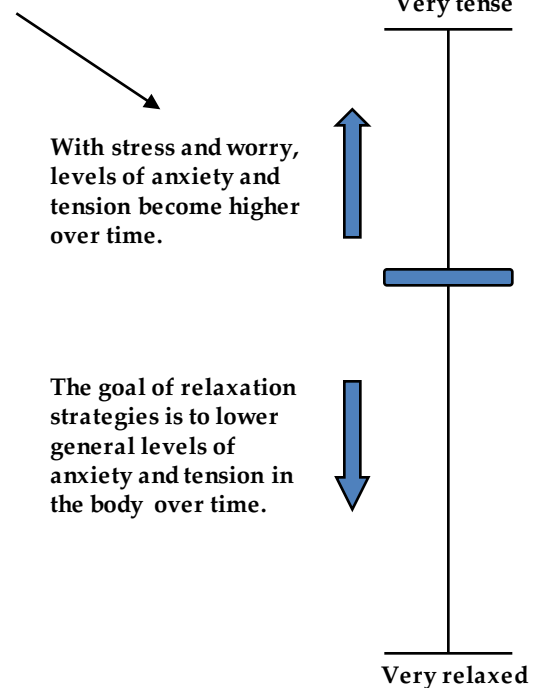
We know that the body needs time to learn how to run for long distances and build strength. She would need to practice at least a few times per week for a number of weeks to be ready.

Relaxation skills are developed just like exercise: in order to see significant results, we must use them regularly over long periods of time. This is not a one shot deal!



Each person is different-- we all relax in different ways. In this module we'll discuss a number of different methods to try:

1. Find a relaxation exercise that you can practice daily or multiple times per week. Examples are progressive muscle relaxation, yoga, mindfulness, and deep breathing.
2. Adjust your lifestyle to make it less busy, hectic, and rushed.
3. Take part in activities that give you pleasure, make you feel competent, or give you a chance to take a break from other, more stressful activities.



Goals of relaxation skills

1. Learn when and how to use these skills.
2. Learn to breathe in ways that will promote calm and relaxation.
3. Slow down activity in the mind to avoid or learn to better tolerate "racing thoughts."
4. Increase awareness of tension in the body and improve awareness of the difference between tension and relaxation.
5. Lower general levels of tension and restlessness in the body.
6. Learn to incorporate activities into our lives that are fun and/or make us feel competent.
7. Be calmer in our daily lives by learning to "slow down" and set realistic goals for our time.

Relaxation Strategies: When? How? Why?

Relaxation strategies are just one set of skills used in CBT. We all would like to spend more time feeling relaxed, but relaxation skills are not always the right skills to improve our anxiety in the long run. One important CBT skill is knowing when to use certain techniques, so we want to know when relaxation strategies are or are not helpful for us.

Relaxation strategies are best used as a **companion to exposure and cognitive skills, but not as a replacement** to them. Sometimes relaxation strategies can actually make anxiety *worse* in the long run. Why? Because sometimes relaxation strategies are used as a way to get rid of anxiety when we are in distress; trying to get rid of something trains our brains to see it as “bad.” So we teach the brain to set off the anxiety “alarm” even louder when the anxiety presents itself. In the long run, this makes the anxiety worse. In short, there are times and places for relaxation skills!

When to use relaxation strategies

-As a daily practice, like exercise, to lower tension and feel calmer in our bodies over time

-During times of distress in order to **prevent avoidance** of something that is integral to our life aims

Why? It is more assertive: “Doing this exercise will not cure my anxiety, but it will keep me from avoiding the situation.”

(When we face the anxiety, the brain learns that it is not so dangerous, which, in turn, lowers the anxiety in the long run)

When *not* to use relaxation strategies

-In times of panic or severe distress as a way to get rid of the anxiety

-As a replacement for other types of CBT skills such as cognitive restructuring and exposure

Why? It is overprotective: “This anxiety is unbearable!

I must do something to make it feel better!”

(This trains in the idea that anxiety is dangerous, which causes more anxiety over time)

Take home points:

Relaxation strategies can be useful in reducing general levels of anxiety and tension over time. They are not typically a “cure” for anxiety; they are best used together with other CBT skills such as cognitive restructuring and exposure and practiced regularly, like exercise. They also should not be used to prevent or get rid of panic or severe anxiety symptoms. For each person there is a different set of activities and skills that help them relax. Our best strategy is to find the ones that work for us and practice them.



“How should I relax? What will work for me?”

Everyone is different— some relaxation skills work well for some people, and others for other people. It is likely that there are some methods that you already use to relax. Think about exercises, practices, or activities you use regularly in order to relax and list them below. If you are having a hard time coming up with something, see page 74, “Finding Relaxation Strategies That Work for You” and review the list of some common methods of relaxation.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

Just breathe!

You may have been told in the past to “take a few deep breaths” when you were feeling worried or upset about something. On one hand this is helpful to just slow down and cool off. However, altering the speed of our breath actually can slightly change our body’s anxiety response. **Slow diaphragmatic breathing** is a developed technique that involves slowing down the breath to communicate “safety” to the brain.

While we do not recommend that you use breathing techniques to try to eliminate anxiety when you are feeling anxious, it can be a way to get through a tough situation and calm the body some so that we can make a good decision about what to do next. Try the following exercise:



“Slow Diaphragmatic Breathing”

1. Sit comfortably in a chair with your feet on the floor. You can lie down if you wish.
2. Fold your hands on your belly.
3. Breathe in slowly and calmly. Fill up the belly with a *normal* breath. Try not to breathe in too heavily. The hands should move up when you breathe in, as if you are filling up a balloon. Avoid lifting the shoulders as you inhale; rather, breathe into the stomach.
4. Breathe out slowly to the count of “5.” Try to slow down the rate of the exhale. After the exhale, hold for 2-3 seconds before inhaling again.
5. Work to continue to slow down the pace of the breath.
6. Practice this for about 10 minutes.
7. This works best if you practice this two times each day for 10 minutes each time. Try to find a regular time to practice this each day.

Slow Diaphragmatic Breathing

Tips:

1. The speed of the breath is more important than the depth of the breath. Avoid trying to “catch” your breath by taking really deep breaths.
2. Don’t use breathing exercises to “get rid of” the anxiety; use the breath to help get you through a tough situation, or practice it daily to “train in” a slower, calmer breathing style over time.
3. Practice! It takes time to learn how to calm the body using the breath.



Take home points:

Slow diaphragmatic breathing is one relaxation skill used in CBT. It is best used as a daily practice, like exercise, or as a way to get through a tough situation without leaving or making things worse. For best results, practice slow breathing twice a day for around 10 minutes each time.

Slow down the mind...

Mindfulness for relaxation and anxiety management

Take a moment to observe the photo to the right and then try this exercise:

Just describe what you see in completely *objective* terms. Just notice colors, shapes, shades, etc. Write what you see here:

Now notice the memories and thoughts that come up when you look at this picture. Allow your mind to wander as it will, and write down what “pops” into your mind as it comes up. Take 1-2 minutes to do this.



Mindfulness Exercise

1. Sit quietly with your feet on the floor, or lie down, and relax your body. Begin with some **slow, diaphragmatic breathing**. Focus your mind on your breath as it flows in and out of your nostrils. Continue to follow your breath to whatever extent you can.
2. As you breathe, notice the tendency of the mind to wander. Instead of trying to focus just on the breath, *just notice what the mind does*. It may wander to a worry, or a memory, or to what you plan to do later today. You may notice sensations in your body, such as a pain or itch. You may hear or smell things. Just notice whatever happens and then gently bring yourself back to your breath. You can remind yourself that you will tend to these other things later, and for now you will just spend time paying attention to your breath and to your mind.
3. Allow the mind to wander as it will, time after time. Avoid the tendency to try hard to focus on something. Simply allow your mind to wander and then bring yourself back to your breath. Notice the tendency of your experience to *change*. Imagine that each thought, sensation, emotion—anything—is like a cloud floating through the sky, soon to be replaced by another one.
4. Continue to practice this for about 10 minutes. Depending on your schedule you can add time to your practice if you want. Practice once or twice a day.
5. Remember that there is no “right” way to do this, other than to just notice whatever comes into your consciousness. It is impossible to “fail” at mindfulness—just let your mind wander!

The techniques you were just using are called **mindfulness** skills. These are techniques that originate in Buddhist meditation practices, but they have been studied and used more and more by psychologists and physicians in the last 20 years or so to help people regulate their emotions and calm their minds. So how do they work?

It is not fully understood why mindfulness is so helpful, but we have some ideas. The goal of mindfulness is to describe all kinds of experiences *objectively* and *non-judgmentally*, focusing on the facts about the present moment. Sound familiar? It may remind you of **cognitive skills**, which are an attempt to gather evidence around a thought that triggers our anxiety, which lessens the power of that thought. Another way to lessen the power of the thought is to see it for what it is: just a thought. And one thing we know about thoughts is that they *change*. It is difficult to adequately capture the gist of mindfulness by trying to explain it, so try the exercise to the right.



“I can’t control my mind!”

On the last page we suggested that you “let your mind wander.” This may seem to be the opposite of what you have been told to do while trying to meditate or complete a task. We go into something expecting to have “control” of our minds.

We know from research that we cannot completely “control” our minds, no matter how hard we try, especially when we are feeling anxious. Why do you think this is true?

Think back to the “Anxiety 101” section of this manual where we described the function of anxiety to help protect us. When we are anxious, the **amygdala**, our anxiety center of the brain is trying to send off its “anxiety alarm.” One way it does this is by trying to alert us to the possibility that something is dangerous, either “out there” in the environment or inside our bodies. After all, if we are too focused on one thing, we could be hurt by something else! So the mind tries to distract us, making it very difficult to “control” the mind. In fact, you may find that the more you try to control it, the more the mind tries to distract you!



Having trouble getting “mindful?”

Try this: pretend your mind is like a movie screen. You are sitting in the movie theater, observing what is projected on the screen, but you are not in control; you just watch and follow what you see.

Try closing your eyes and just notice what images, thoughts, or memories get projected on that screen. They may be related or not—whatever gets projected is fair game! If you start feeling attached to the content of the “movie,” just notice that attachment and then let the movie continue to something else.



“Why should I practice mindfulness?”

Mindfulness techniques are an important part of CBT for the following reasons:

-Trying to “control” the mind is a futile endeavor. In fact, trying to control the mind often makes us feel worse, because we keep failing at it! The first step to any CBT intervention is to stop trying to control the mind through force; only after we do this are we prepared to influence the anxiety using CBT skills.

-Mindfulness helps us practice observing but not reacting to anxiety and other emotions. We learn to accept or tolerate these emotions, rather than trying to eradicate them.

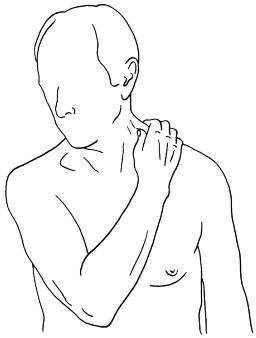
-Mindfulness helps to retrain the brain; by not reacting to the anxiety and not trying to fix it, we communicate to the amygdala that it is not dangerous. This is one way to work on addressing the “fear of fear.”

-When we stop and pay attention to the present moment, we listen to our anxiety “alarm.” If we give it time and keep from “fueling” the anxiety, the body can eventually learn that it does not need this alarm any longer, so it can turn it off.

Mindfulness: Take Home Points

Mindfulness is a relaxation strategy that can be helpful in calming the mind by reducing our tendency to try to control it, which often makes the anxiety worse. Mindfulness techniques focus on facts and objective information about current experiences, including emotions, thoughts, memories, and sensations. Our aim is to notice these experiences without judgment or any attempt to change them; we simply observe them, like clouds in the sky or the images on a movie screen. Mindfulness techniques are not likely to cure anxiety all by themselves, but they can be helpful if used with other CBT skills, and can provide a foundation upon which to develop these skills.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation



One way to think about relaxation is that it is the *absence of tension* in the body's muscles. Imagine being able to simply release your body's tension instantly without taking medication or having a drink! In the 1920's Edmund Jacobson, a Chicago physician, created a set of exercises aimed to do just that—he published his intervention in a book entitled *Progressive Relaxation*. What Jacobson knew to be true is that deep muscle relaxation is incompatible with our body's anxiety response. He worked with the knowledge that by consciously working to reduce muscle tension, we can actually influence how anxious we feel.

The aim of what we now call **Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)** is to gradually learn to release tension in the muscles through daily exercises. This communicates calm and safety to our body, reducing the body's need to activate the "fight or flight" response.

Exercise

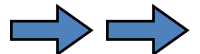
To get a taste of this, try tensing the muscles of the arms by "flexing" your biceps, as in the picture to the right. Tense your biceps hard enough to feel significant tension for between 5 and 7 seconds.



Now let go, dropping your arm to your side. Feel the difference between the tension you just felt and the relaxation that is coming over your arm now. You may notice the feeling of blood flowing to the arm, and a feeling of warmth. PMR involves doing this with each group of muscles in the body, as a regularly practiced exercise that takes effect over a period of time.

To get a full "dose" of Progressive Muscle Relaxation, **try the track "Progressive Muscular Relaxation"** on the Anxiety Disorders Program Website. This will take you about 16 minutes. This track will help you relax the body, one muscle group at a time. It is best to try to practice this for two weeks, once or twice a day. Some people find that it is helpful to do it in the morning when they wake up, or at night before going to bed.

After you try this, you can decide if you want to continue with **Applied Relaxation**, which is the program described on the next page. This program builds on what we have learned from Progressive Muscle Relaxation by helping us to learn to relax more and more quickly.

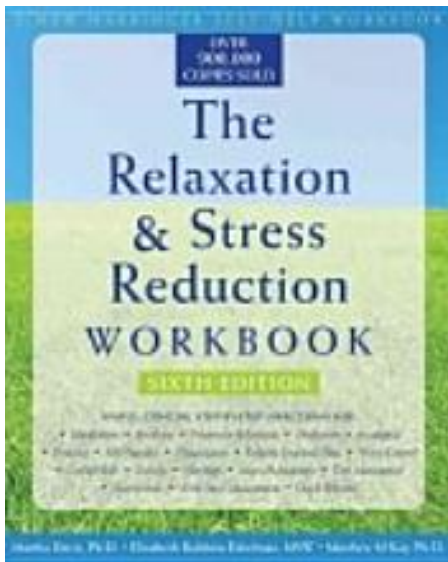


Progressive Muscle Relaxation: Take Home Points

Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR) is a set of exercises aimed at helping us reduce anxiety and tension in the body. Through the practice of tensing and relaxing groups of muscles, we learn to feel the difference between tension and relaxation and release muscle tension when we feel it. It works best if practiced regularly. As with any skill, relaxation takes time and practice to master.

Applied Relaxation (see the next page) builds on the skills learned in PMR to more quickly reach a relaxed state, even under stressful circumstances.

*For more information about Progressive Muscle Relaxation and Applied Relaxation, refer to **Davis, Robbins, and McKay's Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook**, which has written scripts for these techniques.*



Applied Relaxation

The Swedish physician **L.G. Öst** took the principles of Progressive Muscle Relaxation and developed **Applied Relaxation**, a program that aims to increase our ability to relax quickly, even in stressful circumstances. This is a set of skills that takes time to develop—as you can see from the outline of the stages below, each of the stages of treatment involves one to two weeks of practice. Full scripts of this program are available in **Davis, Robbins, and McKay's *Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook***.

1A: Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR) is the basic skill (this is discussed further on the previous page). While guided by a therapist (or recording), a person practices tensing and then relaxing individual muscle groups, which releases tension and makes one more aware of the difference between tension and relaxation. It is good to practice in the morning or at night before going to bed. Try practicing it one or two times per day for two weeks before expecting to see results.



6. Applied Relaxation

This final stage uses the same techniques used in Stage 5, now applied to more stressful situations, including those that involve some degree of anxiety.



5. Rapid Relaxation

Rapid Relaxation allows us to bring the time to relaxation down to 20-30 seconds. We learn to pick something in our daily life with which we have contact regularly, such as a clock or watch, and associate this cue to the relaxation we have learned in the previous stages. Some people find it helpful to put a piece of colored tape on whatever cue they pick. It works best if we can practice this 15-20 times a day in *normal, non-stressful situations*.

You will know when you are ready to move on to the next step when you can bring a sense of relaxation to the body within 20-30 seconds.



Applied Relaxation

Stage 1A: Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR) (Track One): 2x per day in 18 minute increments for 2 weeks.

Stage 1A: PMR Shorthand Procedure (Track Two): 2x per day in 7-8 minute increments for 2 weeks.

Stage 2: Release-Only Relaxation (Track Three): 2x per day in 5-7 minute increments for 1-2 weeks.

Stage 3: Cue-Controlled Relaxation (Track Four): 2x per day in 2-3 minute increments for 1-2 weeks.

Stage 4: Differential Relaxation (Tracks Five and Six): 2x per day in 10 minute increments

Stage 5: Rapid Relaxation (Track Seven): Practiced multiple times a day in the flow of daily life.

Stage 6: Applied Relaxation (Track 8): Here the goal is to learn to relax quickly under actual stressful circumstances.

1B: Progressive Muscle Relaxation: "Shorthand Procedure"

Once a person has mastered the basics of Progressive Muscle Relaxation, we can begin to learn to reach this relaxed state more quickly, by tensing and relaxing larger groups of muscles at one time. This shortens the time to do the exercises to 8 to 9 minutes.



2: Release-Only Relaxation

In this phase of Applied Relaxation treatment, we take out the "tensing" step, to learn to release muscles and feel relaxed even more quickly-- in around 5-7 minutes.



3: Cue-Controlled Relaxation

Cue-Controlled Relaxation reduces the amount of time to deep relaxation. We learn to be able to relax whenever we choose, for example, when we say the word "relax." It is possible to reduce the time to relaxation to around 2-3 minutes in most cases.



4. Differential Relaxation

The goal of **Differential Relaxation** is to help one learn to relax in the midst of daily activities. Most daily activities involve use of some muscles but not others. In this step we learn to isolate the muscles we need for a specific task and relax the rest of our body. In this way we can learn to incorporate relaxation into the flow of daily life.

Finding Relaxation Strategies that Work for You

Imagine that you are at a supermarket shopping for breakfast cereal. So many choices! Some people like a simple granola, others enjoy their cereal sweet, and others like something with fruit in it. You might choose something you've enjoyed before, or you might try something new because it looks like it would be tasty or nutritious.

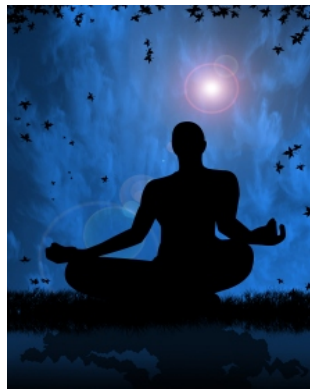
When it comes to relaxation strategies, there are many options. We have to find the ones that work for us. So far we've introduced three available "brands" of relaxation: **breathing, mindfulness, and Progressive Muscle Relaxation.**

You may have listed some relaxation strategies that work for you in the section: "Relaxation Strategies When? How? Why?" Below we list a number of other popular, formal relaxation strategies that have been used successfully by others. You might try some and add them to your list!



"Soothing" Activities

- Sounds: music you enjoy; ambient music; "new age," repetitive music; sounds of nature, such as babbling brooks or ocean waves
- Smells (Aromatherapy): incense, candles, etc.
- Sights: Visualization: beaches, falling leaves, etc.
- Nature: hiking, swimming, parks, etc.

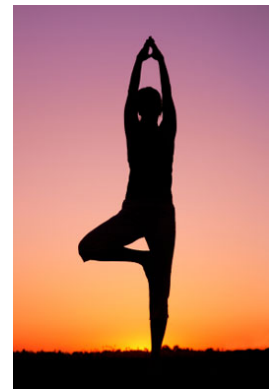
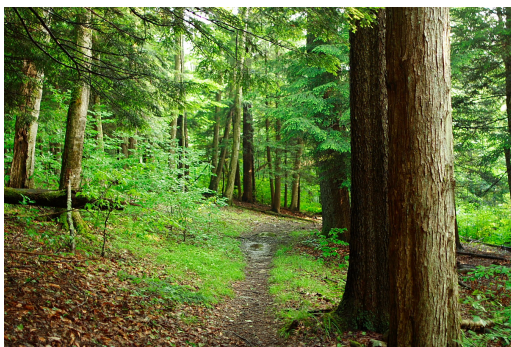


"Mind-based" Relaxation Strategies

- Meditation (**Mindfulness meditation,** Transcendental Meditation, etc.)
- "Body Scan"/body awareness exercises
- Prayer
- Autogenics

"Body-based" Relaxation Strategies

- Slow-paced diaphragmatic breathing
- Yoga
- **Progressive Muscle Relaxation** and **Applied Relaxation**
- Massage
- Hot tubs, hot baths, or sauna



Did you know?

Yoga is a well-established, historic discipline that incorporates a powerful combination of mental and physical elements: breathing, stretching, meditation, and strengthening exercises, aimed at improving physical and mental well-being. It involves a series of challenging body positions that stretch and strengthen muscles. It is best learned by taking a class with a certified yoga instructor, and has many benefits, both physical and mental.

On this page we introduced some of the structured approaches to relaxation that have been used successfully by others over the years. However, some of the most relaxing activities are those that we enjoy, or make us feel good because we are good at them and can be creative or skillful. On the next page we discuss **mastery** and **pleasure**, two important elements of living a relaxing and enjoyable life.



A Life Worth Living: Pleasure and Mastery

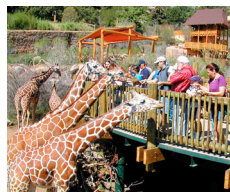
If someone were to ask you “What do you do to relax?” it is likely that you would say something like “I like to hang out with friends,” “I watch TV,” or “I play golf.” While these are not formal relaxation strategies, they bring us pleasure and/or make us feel good about ourselves; we certainly feel more relaxed when that is the case. These are the things that the anxiety tries to take away from us, which is even more of a reason to spend time doing them!

For the purpose of exploration here, we outline two important generators of good feelings: pleasure and mastery. **Pleasure** involves activities, or “play” that we enjoy for the sake of the activity itself. **Mastery** involves activities, such as work or sports, that involve the development of skills; we are able to accomplish things and feel a sense of mastery over our environment. When enjoyed in moderation and diversified well with other activities, they can increase positive emotions and improve how we feel about ourselves.

“Pleasure”

Hobbies and other “play”

- Reading
- TV, movies, plays
- Dancing
- Playing or listening to music
- Board games or cards
- Arts and crafts, sewing, painting
- Cooking
- Walking, hiking, enjoying nature, fishing
- Sports (basketball, softball, swimming, etc.) or going as a spectator
- Martial arts (karate, etc.)
- Museums/zoo
- Video games
- Traveling, sightseeing, going to the beach, sunbathing
- Shopping
- Gardening/decorating
- Photography
- Comedy: TV, recordings, live
- Religion or spirituality



Social activities

- Spending time with family
- Enjoying own children and/or young relatives
- Enjoying close friends
- Hanging out with large groups of friends/acquaintances
- Parties, meeting new people
- Romance
- Pets
- Clubs: meeting people with similar interests
- Enjoying food and drink with others



List enjoyable activities in which you take part now or have enjoyed in the past. Add others from the list above that appeal to you or others that you think you might enjoy:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

“Mastery”

Job or Meaningful Daytime Activity

Look for or attempt to develop some of these qualities in your occupation, volunteer work, or other meaningful daytime activity:

- Enjoyment
- Creativity
- Feelings of competence (able to accomplish tasks satisfactorily)
- Potential for development of skills
- Ability to “move up” in the organization or take on more responsibility, if this is desired
- Social contact with coworkers, colleagues, others in the field



Other skill-based activities



- Sports
- Music practice and performance
- Home improvement/building
- Woodworking
- Visual art (painting, drawing, pottery, sewing, knitting)
- Learning about interests (history, politics, food, language, culture, etc.)

List skill-based activities, such as work or sports, that are a part of your daily routine and lead to positive feelings and a sense of self-worth. Choose others from the list above or fantasize about possible activities that seem rewarding. Write them here.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

"Self-care:" An Important Weapon In Our Fight Against Anxiety

As we have discussed throughout this manual, battling anxiety requires a multifaceted strategy; we have to "unite our forces" to keep anxiety from interfering with our life aims. CBT supplies us with some of the ammunition to wage this battle, but other lifestyle factors are important, as well. Below we discuss some of these factors; consider them when assessing your challenges with anxiety and consider trying out some changes to see if they help.

Moderate and Balance Coping Skills

Address anxiety from a variety of different angles by confronting fear, problem solving, accepting that which cannot be controlled, and modifying thinking when necessary. Take care of the body and mind, addressing the important elements of self-care listed below. Remember that "diversity" is the cardinal rule when it comes to coping with challenges; the more skills and coping methods we have, the more flexible we can be when challenges arise.

Diet

Eating a balanced diet helps us maintain health, improves energy, and contributes to good mood. Be aware of the quality of your food, as well as how much you eat; eating either too much or too little can affect how you feel on a daily basis.

Confront Conflict

Do not allow interpersonal conflicts to fester; learn assertiveness and other communication skills and address conflict proactively and diplomatically.

Goal Setting

Set realistic goals in line with your life aims. Strive for balance of meaningful work, interpersonal (family and friends), and enjoyment-oriented goals. Remember to take one small step at a time to reach larger goals.

Treat Physical Illness

Scientific research shows a connection between physical health, mood, and anxiety. Learn about your family medical history, go to the doctor as needed, and take prescribed medications.

Social Support

When we feel supported by others, we feel more safe, secure, and happy. One important approach to treating anxiety is to reduce symptoms; another way is to increase positive experiences, especially with people that help us feel good about ourselves.

Treat Mental Illness

Learn to manage anxiety using CBT skills. Treat other forms of mental illness if they interfere with your life. If the therapy you try does not seem to be working, try another therapy style or therapist. Consider a "combination therapy," which combines a assortment of therapy skills, medication, and self-care.



Exercise

Regular exercise has been shown to be as good as antidepressant medication for treating depression and increases our resistance to debilitating anxiety. Try to get a minimum of 20 minutes of vigorous cardiovascular exercise at least three times a week. Of course, be sure to ask your doctor if you are healthy enough for more intensive exercise.

Time Management

Set realistic goals about what can be accomplished in a certain amount of time. Avoid multi-tasking excessively. Plan your day with enough time left over to sleep enough, exercise, and enjoy a leisure activity. If you feel that you have trouble managing your time, discuss it with a therapist or life coach.

Avoid or limit use of "mind altering drugs"

Be aware that all drugs that alter state of mind such as alcohol, caffeine, nicotine, mari-juana, other illicit drugs, can exacerbate anxiety in both the short and long term. Discuss your use of these substances openly with a prescribing clinician to understand better your own risk factors.

Sleep

Research has shown that most people need an average of about 7 hours of sleep per night. Sleeping well is an important aspect of managing anxiety. Talk to your doctor or therapist about a referral for a consultation with a sleep expert if you suffer from insomnia or sleep apnea.

"Slow down"

Ask yourself: "Has there been a day this week in which I did not "rush" at all? Keeping a constant fast pace in activity, whether walking, working, or even planning leisure activities, communicates a sense of urgency to the brain, raising blood pressure and tension in the body. This has an impact on our anxiety from day-to-day. Practice "slowing down" your pace of life consciously to reduce this sense of urgency.

My Relaxation Plan

Use the following worksheet and design your own relaxation plan to begin incorporating relaxation skills into your daily life. Be specific and come up with as many choices as you can imagine— remember that not all strategies will “stick,” but in time you can find the ones that feel best to you. The only thing left to do is give them a try!

My Relaxation Plan (how I plan to incorporate relaxation into my daily life)

Formal relaxation exercises (Progressive Muscle Relaxation, Mindfulness, Slow Diaphragmatic Breathing, Yoga):

How often (days per week, time of day, etc.): _____

Pleasure and Mastery (activities I enjoy, socializing, things I am good at): _____

Self-care (see the section on “Self-care” and write down examples that would improve your life):

Other soothing activities: _____

Are there any aspects of my lifestyle (time management, too many projects, etc.) that increase my level of tension and anxiety on a daily basis?

What could be modified? _____

How would my life improve if I incorporated some of the elements above into my daily life?

What is one thing I can do today or tomorrow to make a small step toward more relaxation in my daily life?

Relaxation

Summary

Relaxation strategies battle anxiety from the standpoint of the body. They are just one set of exercises used in CBT.

We discussed **what relaxation strategies are** and how we can use them to help us battle anxiety symptoms. We learned that relaxation strategies work best if they are **practiced over the long term**, like exercise, to reduce muscle tension, slow down the pace of breathing, and “slow down the mind.”



Relaxation strategies are not ultimately helpful as a way to reduce severe anxiety symptoms, such as panic, when these symptoms arise. Relaxation skills are **used in combination with the cognitive and behavioral skills** discussed throughout this manual. Cognitive therapy and exposure skills work to retrain the brain to have fewer anxiety triggers. Relaxation exercises are not very effective at “retraining” these triggers, which is why they are not typically enough on their own to teach the brain that it can let the “guard” down.

We discuss **breathing skills**. The most important element of breathing is **slowing down the pace of the breath**, which takes practice, especially if anxiety is in the picture.



We introduced **mindfulness** skills, which are techniques that aim to “slow down the mind.” We learn to see thoughts and feelings for what they are— thoughts and feelings—that come in and out of our awareness. By allowing them to come and go without trying to “fix” them, we communicate less urgency and more “calm” to the body.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR) involves tensing and relaxing groups of muscles to learn to better understand the difference between tension and relaxation. Through a program called **Applied Relaxation**, we can learn to do this more and more quickly with practice.

There are many formal relaxation strategies, and each person may find something different that works for them. The important thing is to **find the strategies that work for you** and practice them consistently over time.

Some of the most relaxing activities are those that involve things we enjoy or are good at. **“Pleasure”** and **“mastery”** feel good, so doing more of these things can only help! The anxiety often gets in the way of some of these things, but avoiding pleasurable activities is likely to make things worse. It is important to incorporate some of these activities into our daily lives on a regular basis.



Finally, we review important elements of **self-care**, such as exercise, diet, and time management. It is difficult, for example, to feel relaxed when we do not get enough sleep or are too busy. Slowing down the pace of life and taking care of our bodies can help us feel more relaxed from day-to-day.

So now what?



So far we have discussed many of the skills used in CBT. Our final step is to learn how to put them all together and manage anxiety over the long term. That’s what the next section, “Anxiety Management,” is all about. We’ll also learn about the CBT treatment options that we offer here at U of M. It’s time to take your life back from anxiety by formally starting your CBT treatment!

Notes

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