

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Free Time and Relaxation

AGENDA

- Welcome and reflections on previous session
- Homework discussion
- Topic: Free Time and Relaxation
 - Introduction
 - Problems With Free Time and Relaxation for People With a Complex Dissociative Disorder
 - Tips for Resolving Inner Conflicts About Relaxation and Free Time
 - Tips for Managing Free Time
 - Learning to Safely Relax
 - Relaxation Exercises
- Homework
 - Reread the chapter.
 - Practice the relaxation exercises.
 - Complete Homework Sheet 11.1, Developing a Relaxation Kit.
 - Complete Homework Sheet 11.2, Exploring Inner Obstacles to Leisure Time and Relaxation.

Introduction

We all need time to safely relax and do what we like. An essential part of your healing is learning to make use of free time for relaxation, rejuvenation, fun, and new interests. Learning, laughing, having fun, and being curious all help maintain balance and perspective in daily life. In the same way as with balancing work, people with dissociative disorders need to find the right distribution of their free time, including personal time to communicate and

work with inner parts. However, for traumatized individuals, a number of factors may impede the use of what should be healing relaxation and leisure time.

Problems With Free Time and Relaxation for People With a Complex Dissociative Disorder

You may find that you avoid free time, relaxation, or leisure activities, even though other people generally find them to be rejuvenating and essential. Such unstructured times may present an opportunity for the inner turmoil and distress that you avoid to rise up into your awareness. And perhaps you have developed negative beliefs and fears about free time or relaxation. Thus, you may encounter some of the following difficulties:

- If you try to relax, you may be afraid of losing control, becoming overwhelmed, or of having other parts of you take control.
- Various parts may have different needs and wishes about leisure time, resulting in conflicts about how you should spend your free time. And at times, some part might believe that a particular activity, such as relaxing, is dangerous and thus inhibits other parts from engaging in it. Ongoing conflicts may sometimes result in a “stalemate” in which you do not do anything at all.
- Free time (for instance, weekends, holidays) may trigger memories of painful past experiences, making it more difficult to enjoy your time in the present (see [chapter 16](#)).
- You may have inner feelings or voices that prohibit pleasure, enjoyment, or play. Perhaps these messages are shame based, coming from a belief that you do not deserve to feel good or that you are lazy. Or they may be based on a fear that you will “get in trouble” or that “bad things always happen when you are feeling good.”
- You, or some parts of you, may be afraid to “let down your guard.” That is, you feel a strong need to be on high alert all the time and thus find it impossible to relax. In fact, attempts to relax may actually increase a feeling of being vulnerable or unsafe.

The most effective way to deal with inner conflicts about how to spend your free time is to reflect on the inner concerns, beliefs, and needs of all parts of yourself. And then, as with all other inner conflicts, steadily learn to empathize, negotiate, and cooperate about your leisure time. Of course, it is important to be realistic and reasonable about what you are able to do: Work, play, relationships, and relaxation must be balanced and within your capacity as a whole person. For example, you cannot stay up having fun all night and expect to go to work and be at your best the next day. Nor can you work excessively long hours each day and expect yourself to have quality time for inner reflection and care for inner parts of yourself. Always consider your commitments, budget, and energy level in planning your free time.

Tips for Resolving Inner Conflicts About Relaxation and Free Time

If you experience some of the conflicts described earlier or in Homework Sheet 11.2 (at the end of this chapter) about free time and relaxation, try some of the following suggestions to help you resolve them:

- Take time to reflect on why you might be having difficulties with free time or relaxation and make a list of these obstacles.
- Do not judge yourself about these conflicts; just notice them.
- Prioritize as best you can from the least to the most difficult conflicts on your list. Begin with the least difficult and gradually work your way through to the most difficult. As you gain mastery with resolving the less intense conflicts, you and all parts of yourself become more confident and trusting with each other, and they will be more willing to take the next steps.
- Using an inner safe space, meeting room, or by talking inwardly, determine whether all parts of you might agree that relaxation might be a good thing if it were completely safe and allowed. If so, good: You can take the next step. If not, stop and reflect on why parts of you believe relaxing would not be helpful even if it were safe and allowed.
- Let yourself imagine, all parts of you, a foreign land in which

relaxation and free time are encouraged as a natural part of every day. In this land, everyone works hard, but they also play hard. No one is in a hurry. No one is critical of others. No one is punished. Imagine yourself watching people in this foreign land as they relax, rest, laugh, play, and enjoy themselves after work. Notice how this image affects all parts of you.

- You might talk inwardly to remind all parts of you that when you (all of you) feel safe and relaxed in a safe environment, there is less chaos and noise inside. All parts might benefit. Critical or angry parts might find they have to spend less energy managing young parts of yourself if those parts feel safe and more relaxed, and even have fun.
- Remind all parts that enjoying relaxation and free time does not mean you are lazy or not completing your work. It is well known that people who take time off to relax and rest are more productive and effective when they do work.
- Remind all parts that it is possible to be alert and relaxed at the same time.
- If parts continue to feel unsafe in relaxing, ask whether perhaps one part of you might remain “on guard” while other parts of you rest. Various parts of you could take turns with “guard duty” so that each part of you has rest times.
- Make sure you take time to orient all parts to the present and reassure them that relaxation and free time are allowed and healthy, and you will not get in trouble for taking some time for yourself.
- If traumatic memories or intense emotions are triggered when you have free time, help vulnerable parts to stay in a safe place during that time, assuring them that they will be attended to in the near future. And continue to orient them to the present. Be sure to keep such promises as all parts must learn to trust each other.
- Engage in inner discussions and negotiation about what to do in your free time. If there are conflicts, try taking turns, doing one activity one time, and another activity the next time. Or try finding activities that are enjoyable to all parts of you (or at least acceptable). Negotiate healthy “deals” internally. For example, if a critical part allows you an hour of free time without complaint, agree that you will work on a specific task

- in return after your free time. Be sure to follow through.
- Take small steps. For example, practice relaxation for 1 minute, if 10 minutes is too much. Or 30 seconds if a minute is too much. Go only as fast as the slowest part of you, while always helping such parts by giving them the resources they need to take a step. Above all, do not be critical of yourself or other parts of you.

Next you will find some tips on relaxing safely and using your free time effectively.

Tips for Managing Free Time

- Schedule some free time for yourself every day. Begin by structuring small amounts of free time, for example, 30 minutes or an hour (less if this amount is not tolerable).
- Become more aware of what activities you, and other parts of you, might like to do or what you would like to learn to do for enjoyment. Do not eliminate ideas with arguments about why you cannot do them. Try to be open to new possibilities and help other parts be open to trying something new as well.
- Make a list of what you might like to do. Setting aside differences, are there any activities that all parts of you might enjoy? Start with one of these activities first.
- If you avoid free time or relaxation, reflect and ask yourself (or other parts that might be involved) of what you are afraid or ashamed.
- If you have too much unstructured free time, be willing to add more activities and use your time toward healing, for instance, by attending to parts of yourself that need your care.
- If you have no idea what you want to do, notice what other people do and see whether something appeals to you. Try taking an art class, volunteering, hiking, or joining a choir. Do not wait until you are sure about an activity. Try it, and if you do not like it, you can always stop. Remember that trying new things is a great way to learn whether you like them and to have fun in the process.
- Try not to worry about failing. The task is to enjoy learning, even if you do not do something well.

- Be persistent and patient with yourself.

Learning to Safely Relax

People who have been traumatized often find it difficult to relax, because they, or at least some parts of themselves, are almost always on high alert. They may feel it is not safe to relax because they would not be able to notice danger. But in reality, relaxation occurs at many levels of awareness and alertness. A person can be extremely relaxed, present, and alert or relaxed in a drowsy kind of way. Being simultaneously alert and relaxed is actually the most adaptive and flexible way to be most of the time. Parts of you can help each other to realize this state of mind. In [chapter 8](#), you learned how to begin to develop an inner sense of safety. That sense of safety is a foundation that will allow you to learn to relax more effectively and easily.

To practice relaxation, try one of the following exercises at a time when you are not pressured to do something or go somewhere, and when your mind is relatively quiet.

Once you become accustomed to practicing an exercise and are able to relax, begin using it when you are tired, stressed, or feeling low. The earlier you intervene with yourself by helping yourself feel calmer, the more effective the exercise. The following imagery exercises are meant to help you and all parts of yourself feel better, stronger, and to regain more emotional balance.

Try making an audio file of one of these exercises so you can listen to it when you choose. You can do it yourself, or perhaps ask your therapist or a friend or partner to make it for you. Play around with the wording first, so that it fits just exactly right for you and all parts of yourself.

Try one or more of the following exercises. Read through them first to see whether one is especially appealing to you. If you wish, you can change the setting (that is, imagine a mountain instead of a safe tree; a forest instead of a healing pool).

RELAXATION EXERCISES

The Tree

Sit or lie down somewhere quiet and pleasant and breathe quietly, closing your eyes safely. Remind all parts of you that you are safe and that you are working to help each part of you feel better. Invite all parts to participate. If some parts do not wish to do so, they may watch from a distance or go to their own safe place. Gradually direct all parts of you that want to participate to an imagined scene. This place is a quiet and safe spot in the open air with beautiful scenery, just the right temperature, in your favorite season of the year. And around you, you see magnificent trees, resplendent in their green finery. Look around slowly for a tree that appeals to you, one that almost seems to invite you to become acquainted. Perhaps it is a tree standing alone, tall and proud, or perhaps a tree in a forest, one of many in a wise and strong community of trees. Your tree may be short or tall, fat or thin, young or old, firm or willowy. Take your time to choose your tree and remember that you can always change to another tree if and when you wish. Some parts of you may want to choose different trees, each having their own, and of course, this is just fine. Once you, all parts of you, have a clear image of your special tree, take your time to examine it carefully. Notice its shape and texture, its warm wood scent and palette of colors. Become aware of the branches spreading out to shelter you, the leafy, soothing green that extends an invitation for you to relax and rest. Take your tree in until it becomes a natural memory, indelible in your mind.

Walk up to your tree and get acquainted. Begin by exploring the trunk and all its nooks and crannies. Run your hand over the bark. Notice any knotholes or hollows. Put your arms around your tree; notice if you can get your arms right round it, or whether it is so thick you cannot encircle it. Lean up against your tree. Feel its strength, solid and unyielding, protective and grounding. If you wish, you can sit under your tree, with your back comfortably against it, with confidence that it will support you no matter how hard you lean. Now notice that your tree is not standing on its own. It has powerful roots that go deep and deeper, and deeper still into the earth, anchoring it to the ground, and drawing sustenance up and up, all through the tree, to the tiptop. Your tree is always grounded and dwells in the present, its rich history inscribed in its rings, and its branches ready for the winds that blow. It fears neither fair weather nor foul, bending with the storm, swaying with the breeze, resting under the heavens when all is quiet and still. In rain and wind, sun and snow, storm and showers: always steady and grounded. Feel this stalwart and faithful presence in

your mind, in your body, and in your heart. Let you and all parts of you feel rooted to the earth with your tree. Let you and all parts of you feel the power and strength, the grounding and readiness to meet what is, and what shall come, unwavering and constant. Let yourself feel the power of your tree with its enormous root system, connected to the earth.

Now draw your attention upwards, to the branches and boughs, to the limbs and leaves. Each branch is unique, each weaving with the other to design beautiful foliage that is never exactly the same from day to day and year to year. The leaves take in light and create energy. They provide you with shelter and shade, safety and soothing, their gentle rustle a pleasant sound in your ears. The play of shadow and light as the branches move is pleasant to your eyes, giving you a sense that all is right with the world. You may even want to climb your tree and sit on one of those branches, gleefully swinging your legs or thoughtfully surveying your world from up there. Perhaps you take a nap in the shady haven of your tree. It is a good, grounding, safe feeling, being with your tree.

Your tree is a refuge where birds may safely nest, small animals may shelter from the elements, where a tree house might be built, or a swing hung from its boughs. It is a hideout that no one can see, that is just for you, where you can retreat whenever you wish. The strength and beauty and peacefulness of your magnificent tree give you a feeling of protection and sturdiness. You, and any parts of you, can go there whenever you like; you can picture it in your mind and look at it, lean against it, or hide in it, as you wish or need.

The Healing Pool

Imagine a beautiful pool of water with just the right surroundings. Perhaps you discover it in a quiet forest, or nestled in the mountains, or in the midst of a meadow. The air around it is fresh, clean, and just the right temperature for you. The season of the year is your favorite. Perhaps it is spring, with all living things blooming and growing. Perhaps it is summer, lazy and languid. Or perhaps it is autumn, cool and crisp. Or perhaps it is winter, a soft blanket of white on the ground. The water is beautiful, inviting. Perhaps it is still, gently fed by deep springs, reflecting back to you the sky or trees above. Perhaps it is flowing and bubbling, at the bottom of a waterfall or fed by rivers or streams. It may be shallow or deep, or both at once. It is pleasant to watch, its freshness smells

joyful and clean. So pleasant that you feel almost drawn to its safety and soothing. The sounds around you are delightful: rustling trees or meadow grass, the bubble and babble of water, happy little animal sounds, and birds calling out joyfully. Notice what is right for you. Take your time to notice your pool, its shape, its surroundings, its depth, whether there are little fishes or just clean, fresh water. Perhaps it is a shimmering blue or sparkling green, or clear as a crystal. The light dances and skips across the water and back again to you, inviting you to take it all deeply in. This water calls you to relax, to feel utter and complete contentment and safety. It is healing water, the kind that soothes the sorest body and satiates the thirstiest soul. It refreshes the worn-out mind, a balm for wounds of the heart. When you are ready, allow all parts of yourself to explore your pool and take in its healing energy. Perhaps some parts of you would like to sit thoughtfully next to the water, while some might dangle their feet, their toes dabbling in the water. Some might get in and sit or even float. In fact, you become aware that the water in this pool is the most special you have ever encountered. It buoys you up so you cannot sink. It supports you as you sit, as though you were leaning back into loving arms. It nurtures and soothes, calms and restores, filling you with a peace and a lightness so sweet and splendid that you take it deeply within yourself, to each part of you, to every nook and cranny of pain and stress and sorrow. Let your tension and fear, your burdensome shame and worries be drawn from you to the water and carried away. Let the water surround you, flow around you, refreshing, relaxing, restoring every part of you. Let the water surround you, flow around you. Feel it soothing your body, your mind, your heart. You may remain as long as you like, until every part of you can feel its gentle healing power. This is your pool, where all parts of you can come as they please. It is your special place of healing and hope, soothing and safety, relief and release. It is yours and yours alone to have within you, a wellspring of well-being.

If it is hard for you to use imagery for relaxation, try this exercise:

Physical Relaxation

Sit or lie comfortably. Take a deep breath in through your nose to a slow count of three, hold for three counts, and breathe out slowly through pursed lips for three counts. Repeat three times. Now take in a deep breath and tighten every

muscle in your body as tight as you can from head to toe, hold to the count of five, and let go, breathing out as deeply as you can and intentionally relaxing your muscles as much as you can. Repeat the three deep breaths from the beginning of the exercise. Then again take in a deep breath and tighten all your muscles for the count of five, let go and relax, repeat the three deep breaths. Continue until you feel physically relaxed.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation Technique

The following exercise is a well-known technique that might help you gradually relax your entire body (Jacobson, 1974). When you are anxious or fearful, your body becomes tense and you may experience symptoms such as pain in your neck, shoulders, or back, tension headaches, tight jaws, tensed muscles in legs or arms, and sometimes your whole body may seize up. To train yourself to progressively relax, you will begin by tensing specific groups of muscles and then releasing the tension; focus on the differences between the feelings of tension and relaxation of each group of muscles. You will practice with one area of your body at a time: head and face, neck, shoulders, back, pelvis, arms and hands, legs and feet. If you have any injuries, skip that area of your body if needed. Parts of you may or may not want to participate. As always, pace yourself and do not force any part of you. Spend some time collaborating internally to reach an agreement that is acceptable for all parts of you.

Sit or lie comfortably in a quiet and safe place where you will not be interrupted. You will tense and relax each muscle group twice, taking a short break of about 30 seconds between each cycle, and then move to the next area. When tensing a muscle group, hold for about 5 seconds, then release and rest for about 10 seconds. If you wish, you can combine this exercise with one of the ones described earlier or with your inner safe space.

- Begin by focusing on your hands. Clench your fists, feel the tension of your muscles for 5 seconds, and then release 10 seconds. Concentrate on the differences between tension and release. Repeat once more.
- Now focus on your arms, draw your forearms toward your shoulder, feel the tension in your biceps (5

seconds), and then let go and relax (10 seconds). Concentrate on the differences between tension and release. Repeat once more.

- Tighten your triceps—muscles on the underside of your upper arms—by stretching your arms out straight and locking your elbows. Feel the tension in your triceps and then let go, relaxing your arms. Concentrate on the differences between tension and release. Repeat this once more. As your arms relax, just let them lie by your side or rest on the chair.
- Next, concentrate on your face. Tense the muscles in your forehead by raising your eyebrows as far as you can, feel the tension in your face and eyebrows, hold and then relax. And again, concentrate on the differences between tension and release. Repeat a second time.
- Tense the muscles around your eyes by squeezing them tightly shut and then relax. Observe the different sensations when you tense and when you relax your eyes. Repeat.
- Tighten your jaws by opening your mouth as wide as possible, hold and then relax. Repeat.
- Focus on the muscles in your neck, bow your head, your chin on your chest, then turn your head slowly to the left, return to the center line and lean your head back as far as it will go, then again return your head to its normal position. Turn your head to the right and then again to the normal position. Repeat this slowly and carefully, since there is often a lot of tension in your neck. And again, concentrate on the differences between tension and release.
- Focus on your shoulders. Raise them as though you were going to touch your ears, hold and feel the tension, and then relax. Focus on the different sensations between tension and relaxation of your shoulders. Repeat.
- Then focus on your shoulder blades; pull your shoulder blades back as though you want them to touch them together. Tense and release. Notice the difference between the tension and release. Repeat.

- Stretch your back by sitting up very straight, tighten and let go, then relax. Repeat and focus on the different sensations between tension and relaxation.
- Tighten your buttocks by squeezing them together, hold, and then relax. Repeat.
- Hold your breath, pull your belly in, tighten it, and relax. Repeat and feel the difference in your stomach and belly.
- Now focus on your legs. Stretch your legs out and feel the tension in the muscles of your thighs, hold on, and then relax your legs. Notice the difference between tension and release. Repeat.
- Now extend your legs and point your toes back towards you. Feel the tension in your calves and feel the relaxation after you let go. Repeat.
- Finally focus on your feet. Point your toes down as far as possible and feel the tension in the muscles of your feet; tighten them and then relax. Observe the different sensations when you tense and when you relax the muscles in your feet.
- Now scan your whole body mentally and look for any residual tension. If a particular muscle group is still tense, return to this area once more.
- Now imagine that relaxation is spreading through your whole body; your body may feel warm, a bit heavy, and very safe and relaxed.

Homework Sheet 11.1

Developing a Relaxation Kit

In the same way that you developed a sleep kit in [chapter 9](#), you may design your own “relaxation kit.”

1. Begin by making a list below of activities and exercises, music, or other items or experiences that are enjoyable or fun. List things you imagine would be enjoyable and relaxing, even if you have not tried them yet. Make sure to take into account the different needs and desires of all parts of yourself. Highlight any activities that might be agreeable to all parts of yourself, that is, that you can enjoy as a whole person.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

2. Just as you did with your sleep kit, you may make a special box or basket with various items for your relaxation and comfort, for example, music CDs, relaxing videos, special bath salts, pleasant lotions, a comfortable shawl or sweater, a pair of old slippers, warm socks, candles, special teas or coffees, healthy snacks, a good book, favorite photos, or mementos.

3. List one or two new activities you would be willing to try for relaxation or fun.

4. Describe any inner obstacles to trying these activities.

Homework Sheet 11.2

Exploring Inner Obstacles to Leisure Time and Relaxation

You may find it difficult to enjoy your free time or to relax. Below you will find common reasons why this might be so. Check or circle any that apply and then complete the questions at the end.

You (or a part of you):

- Do not feel comfortable with or know how to “play.”
- Do not like to move your body, so you avoid leisure activities that require any physical exertion.
- Are afraid or ashamed of the feeling of excitement.
- Are afraid or ashamed of the feeling of enjoyment.
- Believe enjoyment is dangerous or bad.
- Believe you do not deserve to relax or feel good.
- Feel out of control when you are excited or enjoying yourself.
- Are afraid you will fail at any leisure activities.
- Are afraid people will ridicule you.
- Are afraid someone will criticize what you are doing.
- Feel that people will not take you seriously.
- Have a belief that having free time means you are lazy or not working hard enough.
- Fear that you will be punished if you have a good time.
- Fear that something bad will happen if you enjoy yourself.
- Fear that if you relax, you will not be able to notice danger.
- Find that certain words, such as “relax,” “enjoy,” “pleasure,” or “play,” are a trigger.
- Experience flashbacks as soon as you start to relax.
- Have panic or serious anxiety as soon as you start to relax.
- Become immediately depressed when you try to relax.
- Feel too much pressure to work and feel guilty or preoccupied if you try to relax.
- Have inner conflict among parts about relaxation and leisure time.
- Have trouble being alone, and thus relaxation is more difficult.
- Other? If so, please describe.

1. Using the list above, and reflecting on other possible reasons, describe two or three fears, concerns, or beliefs that you, or parts of you, have that impede your ability to relax and enjoy free time. You may also refer back to #4 of the previous homework assignment, where you listed obstacles to trying a new leisure activity.

2. Using the section in this chapter, Tips for Resolving Inner Conflicts about Relaxation and Free Time, spend time identifying inner common ground for relaxation and free time. (For example, all parts might agree to practice relaxation exercises for 15 minutes each day this week and see if it is helpful. If so, you can negotiate a next step. If not, parts can discuss what is not agreeable and why, and renegotiate.) Describe your inner communication and negotiation below, as well as what worked and did not work for you.