

Relaxation Therapy Tip Sheet

The following two techniques when practiced regularly can become useful skills that help a child face a plan of gradually increasing exposure to their fears. Gradual, tolerated exposures are a core element of “unlearning” a fear. It is suggested to do either or both of these once a day for a while until the calm state produced can be easily achieved. Using these behaviors will decrease physiological arousal if the body feels anxious, stressed or in pain. It is best to practice these skills at times when not under stress, so one knows how to do it when stressed.

Breathing Control:

1. Imagine that you have a tube that connects the back of your mouth to your stomach. A big balloon is connected to the tube down in your stomach. When you breathe in the balloon blows up and when you breathe out the balloon deflates. Put your hand on your stomach and practice taking breaths that push against your hand out as that balloon inflates. When learning this trick, it might be easier to lie down on your back while you observe what is happening.
2. Now focus on doing these stomach balloon breaths as slowly and as comfortably possible. Inhale slowly, pause briefly, and then gently exhale. When you allow that balloon to deflate, notice the calm feeling that comes over you. Counting the length of each phase may help you find that sense of calm, such as counting slowly to 3 during inhalation, to 2 while pausing, then to 6 while exhaling.
3. Now practice making your breath smooth, like a wave that inflates and deflates.
4. If you experience brief dizziness or tingling in fingers, this just means you are breathing too quickly (hyperventilating), so slowing your breathing further will remove that sensation. Once skilled at this, just a few controlled breaths at a time of stress will produce noticeable relief, and can be done anywhere.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation:

This is particularly helpful for kids who experience body aches along with stress/anxiety. It is easier to have someone guide a child through this the first few times until the technique is learned. Tell kids this is like learning to turn their muscles from uncooked spaghetti into cooked spaghetti.

1. Lie down in a quiet room and take slow breaths, try breathing control as above.
2. Think about the muscles of your head and face, now scrunch them up tightly and clench your teeth, hold that as you count to 10, then allow all of those muscles to relax. Notice that feeling of relaxation in your face, and your jaw loosening.
3. Now concentrate on muscles of your shoulders and neck, tighten up your neck muscles pulling your head down, shrug your shoulders up, hold that uncomfortable tightness, then let all those muscles relax and notice the feeling
4. While continuing your slow breathing, move your attention to your arms and hands, tightening those muscles further and further, hold it as you count to 10, then allow those muscles to relax.
5. Now think about the muscles in your legs, your bottom and your feet, tighten all these muscles up, feel the hard tension throughout your legs, hold it as you count to 10, then allow your legs and feet to relax as you continue your slow breathing.
6. Now that all of your muscles have relaxed, continue your slow breathing and take some time to enjoy the sense of relaxation. Focus on how the most relaxed areas of your body feel now.