Module 13: Relaxation

Objectives

- To understand the concept and importance of relaxation in brief CBT
- To acquire specific relaxation skills (e.g., muscle relaxation, deep breathing, imagery)

What are relaxation techniques and why are they important?

Relaxation techniques consist of a collection of psychotherapeutic techniques designed to reduce tension, stress, worry, and/or anxiety. Relaxation techniques vary in their focus (e.g., physical sensations or changes in cognition/thoughts) and can be selected based on presenting difficulties, as well as patient preferences. Some patients respond to physical procedures (e.g., muscle relaxation and/or deep breathing, while others respond favorably to guided imagery.

Relaxation techniques are important for brief therapy for several reasons. First, they focus on skills that alleviate stress, anxiety, worry, and tension that are often debilitating and interfere with patient functioning. Second, stress, anxiety, worry, and tension are often very uncomfortable for patients, and providing help to alleviate their distress can go a long way towards increasing positive treatment expectations and rapport. Relaxation techniques are easily conveyed as a method of increasing control and often do not include a direct discussion of mental health difficulties, which can be important for some patients who are concerned about mental health stigma. Finally, relaxation techniques are generally easy to teach and learn. For these reasons, it is often advantageous to teach these techniques early in treatment to give patients an easy-to-learn, yet highly effective, skill set.

When? (Indications/Contraindications)

As indicated, relaxation techniques are quite effective early in treatment to reduce tension and increase early treatment successes. They generate increased self-efficacy, perceived control over stress, and improved coping.

Relaxation techniques are useful for broad application or for a specific patient situation. An example of broad applications might include daily relaxation exercises to reduce an overall sense of tension or stress not affiliated with any specific situation (e.g., general worry or apprehension). Relaxation can also be applied to specific situations such as a needle phobia, social anxiety, or stressors at work.

Relaxation procedures can also be appropriate for persons with depressive symptoms to increase their perceptions of control. However, it might not be appropriate for depressive symptoms occurring outside comorbid anxiety/worry. For example, teaching a severely depressed person, who is experiencing fatigue and lack of motivation, to relax would not be useful unless the patient has a specific need for relaxation.

How? (Instructions/Handouts)

Regardless of the actual relaxation technique, it is imperative that the physical environment be attended to so as to maximize results. Before beginning relaxation techniques, it is suggested that you create a safe, quiet, and comfortable environment. You are encouraged to work with patients to create such an environment. Patients may be comfortable with certain recommendations (e.g., unfolding arms) but may be uncertain or uncomfortable with others (e.g., closing their eyes). The following list of options can be used to create an effective atmosphere for relaxation-based interventions.

Setting up the room:

- Comfortable chair (a high-backed chair to support the patient’s neck, if possible)
- Safe and relaxing room (e.g., temperature, noise, and lighting)
Other tips to increase stress-management effectiveness include:

- Having the patient loosen tight clothing (collars, belts, shoes, etc) or remove glasses
- Having the patient sit in a comfortable fashion (e.g., uncrossing arms and legs, placing feet flat on the floor)
- Dimming the lights or removing bright sunshine from the room
- Having the patient close his or her eyes
- Asking the patient whether he or she needs a bathroom break before starting
- Asking the patient to clear the mind and focus on your voice and instructions critical, and you should ensure that patients fully understand how this applies to their current difficulties.

The following sections of this module addresses three specific techniques: progressive muscle relaxation, deep breathing, and imagery. You largely determine selection of a specific technique, but you should select it with the patient's expressed interests and learning preferences/abilities in mind. For example, patients who are largely somatically focused may prefer muscle relaxation or deep breathing. Other patients, especially those who appreciate the association between thoughts and mood, might be best served using guided imagery procedures. However, the ultimate decision of which procedure to use may relate to exposure to all three techniques and a trial-and-error approach.

**Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)**

PMR consists of learning how to tense and then relax various groups of muscles all through the body in a sequential fashion, while paying close attention to the feelings associated with both tension and relaxation. Although muscle relaxation has been around for many years, it has become more popular recently for dealing with different anxiety and panic disorders. With this procedure, the patient learns how to relax and how to recognize and pinpoint tension and relaxation in the body to identify tension and reduce its influence before each reaches high levels/impairment.

In teaching patients muscle relaxation, you should first explain the reason for using muscle relaxation and how it will benefit the patient (rationale). You should also give a full explanation and demonstration of how it is done.

**Step #1: PMR Increases Control.**

Introduce PMR principles and procedures. PMR begins by letting the patient know that he/she can create sensations of relaxation and that this process of “inducing” relaxation begins by being able to identify and discriminate between sensations of tension and relaxation.

**Step #2: Note the Incongruence of Tension and Relaxation.**

Inform the patient that sensations of tension and relaxation cannot occur at the same time. No muscles in the body can be tensed and relaxed at the same time. This principle is

**Step #3: Identify States of Tension.**

Explain to the patient that tension often builds gradually without conscious awareness. Learning to detect the initial signs of an increase is an important step towards avoiding a full-blown occurrence of tension. Inform the patient that, no matter the level of intensity, he or she can stop and reverse the tension using knowledge of PMR – in essence, it is never too late to reduce tension. Over time patients become increasingly skilled at identifying stress earlier and earlier (e.g., their awareness increases).
Step #4: Tense Muscle Groups.

A brief word of caution: If at any point during the technique a patient experiences pain, alter or completely discontinue the technique. If the patient experiences chronic pain in any part of the body, it is best to avoid the tensing component for muscles in that area; just do the relaxing component when the patient gets to those muscle groups.

PMR asks the patient to tense and release different muscle groups in sequence, moving from the arms to the face, neck, chest and shoulders, torso, and legs. For each specific muscle group, it’s important to try to tense only that muscle group during the tensing part of the exercise. Throughout the procedure, it is important to concentrate on the sensations produced by the different exercises. Asking the patient to describe bodily sensations is very important for the learning process. Statements or phrases from you might include: “What are you noticing about your body right now?” These questions help the patient to focus on the way the body “feels” when tense and relaxed.

Tensing Instructions

Model each tension procedure. Ask the patient to practice, and provide feedback. Check to be sure that the patient can identify tension in each group before moving on to the next.

a. Dominant arm. Make a fist and tense biceps; pull wrist upward, while pushing elbow down against the arm of chair or bed.

b. Nondominant arm. Same as above.

c. Forehead, lower cheeks and jaw. Lift eyebrows as high as possible, bite teeth together, and pull corners of mouth tightly.

d. Neck and throat. Pull chin down toward chest; at the same time, try to prevent it from actually touching the chest. Counterpose muscles in front part of neck against those in the back part of neck.

e. Shoulders, chest, and upper back/abdomen. Take a deep breath and hold it. At the same time, pull the shoulder blades back and together, trying to make them touch. Try to keep your arms as relaxed as possible while tensing this muscle group. At the same time make the stomach hard by pressing it out, as if someone were going to hit you in the stomach.

f. Dominant leg. Lift foot off the floor and push down on the chair with thigh.

g. Nondominant leg. Same as above.

Step #5: Debrief After the Exercise.

After relaxation training, question the patient about his or her reaction to the muscle relaxation exercise. It is also important to make any adjustments needed to the training. Monitor any pain the patient experienced to adapt and improve the technique for the individual patient’s needs.

Step #6: Continue to Practice Outside Session.

It will be important for the patient to practice PMR at least once a day over the first week or two to build skills and confidence. As he or she becomes increasingly skilled at PMR, he/she might find it possible to relax without having to actively tense the muscles. The patient should use regularly scheduled homework to practice in a
nondistracting environment. When he or she has learned to relax in a calm environment, it should be easier to
relax in more distracting situations, whenever he or she notices tension developing.

**Deep-Breathing Technique**

Another physiological-based relaxation technique is deep breathing. Deep breathing focuses on reducing rapid
and shallow (ineffective) breathing that often occurs during periods of stress, worry, or anxiety. Rapid and
shallow breaths can lead the patient to have decreased oxygen in the system, which can cause hyperventilation,
dizziness, lightheadedness, or decreased ability to concentrate. Alternatively, taking a deep, full breath can
produce a feeling of calmness or slowing by increasing oxygen rich blood flow.

By asking the patient to attend to breathing and changing the rate and way he or she breathes, you enable him
or her to be able to feel more relaxed and function more –rich blood,) as well as the mind (feelings of calmness).
It can also strengthen muscles in the chest and stomach, which can make it easier to breathe on a daily basis.

**Steps to Deep Breathing**

**Step #1:** Introduce the patient to Deep Breathing. Indicate why Deep Breathing was chosen and provide an
overview of the procedures and potential benefits.

**Step #2:** Ask the patient to put one hand on the abdomen, with the little finger about 1 inch above the navel, and
to place one hand on the chest.

**Step #3:** Ask the patient to pay attention to his or her breathing (pause for several seconds to allow the patient
the opportunity to assess breathing) and ask him/her to tell you which hand is doing more of the moving?
Ideally, the hand on the abdomen should be moving; while the hand over the chest remains still. This ensures
that the breaths are deep.

**Step #4:** Work with the patient to take deeper breaths by getting the hand over the stomach to move while
having little movement of the hand over the chest. Inform the patient, “Your hand on your diaphragm should
move out as you inhale and in as you exhale.”

**NOTE:** If the patient has a lung or heart condition, he/she might have difficulty with deep breathing. If
he/she reports difficulty, slow the process down and help him/her to maximize the exercise comfortably.

**Step #5:** Ask the patient to continue slow, even, deep breaths. To pace the patient, you might suggest that
he/she say the words in and out slowly, while taking breaths. Inhalations and exhalations should build to
approximately 3 seconds in duration.

**Step #6:** Ask the patient if he or she notices any changes in breathing and feelings of relaxation. Ask for general
feedback about the technique.

**Step #7:** Repeat the breathing exercise three or more times until the patient reports skill understanding and
benefit.

**Step #8:** Ask the patient if he or she can identify situations when deep breathing might be appropriate.

**Step #9:** Continue practice outside of session. Work with the patient to set a homework assignment that
encourages application of deep breathing to situations when the patient feels stress.
Imagery

Imagery is a nonphysiological (cognitive) relaxation technique that can be used to ease stress and promote an overall sense of well-being. Imagery focuses on increasing cognitive, emotional, and physical control by changing the focus of an individual’s thoughts. We all have daydreamed about pleasant things that have distracted us and made us feel better. Imagery uses much the same process but encourages positive adaptive “dreaming” that distracts and relaxes the individual. Imagery is highly effective for depression and anxiety, as well as specific situations that require clarity, focus, distraction, or feelings of mastery. The following are examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Focused Topic</th>
<th>Image</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>Negative Selfworth</td>
<td>Images of success or past situations of success; images of a pleasant past experience</td>
<td>Increased self-confidence; reduced negative thoughts; distraction from negative mood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety/Worry</td>
<td>Public Speaking</td>
<td>Image of speech that goes well; image of something funny</td>
<td>Reduced negative focus, distraction, increased positive Expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical Anxiety</td>
<td>Fear of Procedure (e.g., needles)</td>
<td>Relaxation; peacefulness; pain-free environment</td>
<td>Less tension, reduced anxiety, toleration of procedure with less distress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports Performance</td>
<td>Focused efforts during golf game</td>
<td>Envisioning the desired shot; positive words of advice</td>
<td>Increased focus, increased self-confidence, positive thinking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other tips for deep breathing:

1. Inhale through nose and out of mouth.
2. Ask patient to purse lips (as if blowing on hot soup) while exhaling.
3. Do not pause between inhales and exhales.
4. Ask patient to close eyes during the exercise.
5. Patient may want to use mantra such as “relax” during each exhale.
6. Pair up deep breathing with imagery once the patient has begun to master breathing skills.
7. Point out that deep breathing is a portable skill that can be used in a variety of situations and relatively without notice of others (PMR is less portable).
How Guided Imagery Works

Research has shown that the mind can actually affect how the body functions. It seems the body may not know the difference between an actual event and a thought. Guided imagery uses the power of the brain—images and the perception that you are either somewhere else or in a different state of mind—to increase pleasant experiences and performance to promote wellness and health. On the flip side, imagery helps to reduce stress tension and anxiety by changing thoughts and emotions or through distraction.

Imagery is commonly referred to as guided imagery. Guided imagery refers to a process whereby you facilitates or guide the initial images the patient uses. The following section describes how you can guide the patient into the effective use of imagery for relaxation or performance improvement.

Step #1: Introduce Imagery.

Introduce imagery to the patient, pointing out the power of the brain or thoughts and how images, when accessed correctly, can actually change physical and emotional states.

Step #2: Identify the Desired Outcomes, Such as Decreased Anxiety, Increased Focus, Distraction.

Step #3: Develop an Image or Scene.

Work with the patient on the third step to identify a situation, either in the past or a place he/she would like to be, that both you and the patient feel might benefit or produce the desired outcome. Sample imagery scripts are provided below and can be used if the patient has difficulty creating a personal situation. Selection of a powerful image is critical to the success of this technique. Selection of an image that the patient is able to fully embrace increases the odds of treatment success. Selection of a "weak" image (e.g., not viewed as important by the patient or unable to be fully visualized) will likely lead to treatment failure.

Step #4: Increase Vividness of the Image.

To ensure that patients find a “strong” image, ask them to explore as many senses as possible to increase vividness of the image. For example, when imagining a glass of lemonade, imagine holding a glass that feels icy and cold, visualize the color of the lemonade, think of the fresh citrus smell, and finally think of how the lemonade tastes. This is an example of imagery that uses multiple senses and increases vividness of the image. Increasing vividness is largely a matter of increasing the details the patient experiences. The more details described by the patient, the more powerful the technique.

Step #5: Ask the Patient if He or She Notices Any Changes After the Imagery Exercise. Ask for general feedback about the technique.

Step #6: Repeat the Imagery Exercise Until the Patient Reports Skill Understanding and Benefit.

Step #7: Ask the Patient to Identify Situations When Imagery Might Be Appropriate. Expand upon the patient’s responses by adding other situations (e.g., how the technique can be used).

Step #8: Continue Practice Outside Session. Work with the patient to set a homework assignment that encourages application of imagery to situations when the patient feels stress or feels that imagery might be beneficial.
Other tips for imagery:

1. Pair up imagery with deep-breathing exercises.

2. Ask patient to close eyes during the exercise to increase vividness.

3. Interject during the imagery experience aspects that you feel might benefit the patient. For example, a patient might use the beach image; and you might ask how the sun feels on the skin, whether he or she hears anything, or what else he or she sees.

4. Help the patient focus on aspects of the image that will guide him/her towards the goal. Help the patient to avoid too many unnecessary details that might distract from the goal.

5. Point out that imagery is a portable skill that the patient can use in a variety of situations and completely without notice of others (PMR is less portable).

6. Avoid imagery with psychotic patients, who might confuse reality with images.

Imagery: Example Scripts/Guides for Therapists

Script #1: Generic Example

Once your whole body feels relaxed, travel to your favorite place... it can be any time period or any place. This place is calm and safe... there are no worries here... Look around this place. What do you see? Do you hear the sounds around you? What are some of the sounds you hear in this place you are imagining? How does this special place smell? Walk around a little, and take in all the wonderful sights... Feel the air around you and relax.... The air is fresh, and it’s easy to breathe here. Pay attention to how your body feels...... Say to yourself, “I am totally relaxed... without worries... all the tension has drained away from my body.” Take a moment to fully experience your favorite place.... Notice the sounds, the sights, smells, and how it feels to be in this very special place. Remember that you can visit this place as often as you want and that it is wonderful. Say to yourself, “I am relaxed here... this place is special and makes me feel at peace.

When you are done with your visit to this special place, open your eyes and stay in your comfortable position. Continue to breathe smoothly, in a relaxed and rhythmic fashion. Take as long as you want to enjoy and relax. Feel at ease knowing your special place is always available to you, and find that you feel relaxed, even after you leave.
**Script #2: The Beach**

Imagine yourself walking down a sandy beach. The sand is white and warm between your toes. You are looking out over the calm, blue water. The waves are gently lapping at the shore. You feel the pleasant warmth of the sun on your skin... it's a perfectly comfortable temperature outside. Breathe in deeply. There is a gentle breeze, and the sun is shining. Big, cotton-like clouds drift by as you hear sea gulls in the distance. You taste traces of salt on your lips. You are completely relaxed... there are no worries on this beach. There is nothing to distract you from feeling tranquil. Worries drift away. Notice the sounds, sights, smells, and how it feels to be in this very special place.

Feel the sand under your feet... you decide to stretch out on the warm, fine, white sand... breathe deeply... feel the warm air. Your body is completely relaxed, and you have an overall feeling of warmth and comfort. You look up at the clouds pass by slowly across the beautiful blue sky. You are feeling rejuvenated and completely at peace. Remember that you can visit this place as often as you want and that it is wonderful. Say to yourself, “I am relaxed here... this place is special and makes me feel peaceful and content.”

When you are done with your visit, open your eyes and stay in your comfortable position. Continue to breathe smoothly, in a relaxed and rhythmic fashion; take as long as you want to enjoy and relax. You feel at ease knowing your special place is always available to you, and you find that you feel relaxed even after you leave.

---

**Script #3: The Meadows**

Imagine yourself walking through a lovely meadow. The breeze feels pleasant against your skin. You are looking out over the calm, beautiful green grass. The blades of grass are gently swaying in the breeze. You feel the pleasant warmth of the sun on your skin... it's a perfectly comfortable temperature outside. Breathe in deeply. There is a gentle breeze, and the sun is shining. Big, cotton-like clouds drift by as you hear birds in the distance. You hear the wind blow gently through the trees. You taste the sweet summer air on your lips. You are completely relaxed... there are no worries in this meadow. There is nothing to distract you from feeling tranquil. Worries drift away. Notice the sounds, the sights, the smells, and how it feels to be in this very special place.

Feel the cool grass under your feet... you decide to stretch out on the soft, cushiony grass... breathe deeply... feel the warm air. Your body is completely relaxed, and you have an overall feeling of warmth and comfort. You look up as the clouds pass by slowly across the beautiful blue sky. You are feeling rejuvenated and completely at peace. Remember that you can visit this place as often as you want and that it is wonderful. Say to yourself, “I am relaxed here... this place is special and makes me feel peaceful and content.”

When you are done with your visit, open your eyes and stay in your comfortable position. Continue to breathe smoothly, in a relaxed and rhythmic fashion; take as long as you want to enjoy and relax. You feel at ease knowing your special place is always available to you, and you find that you feel relaxed even after you leave.
Other Guided Imagery Scene Suggestions:

- A garden where you watch big, beautiful clouds in a blue sky, while you inhale the scent of flowers and feel a gentle breeze on your skin as the sunshine warms you.

- A mountain scene where you feel calm and relaxed as you look out over the valley. Just you and the vegetation and you dip your feet into a cool mountain stream; and let your foot rest on a big, slippery stone as the sunshine warms you and the wind blows through the trees.

- Advanced scenarios developed with assistance of patient (family, past experiences, etc).

Imagery: Troubleshooting and Tips

Do not use imagery with psychotic patients.

Supplemental Readings


Homework Assignment Examples

1. Practice PMR before you go to bed each night this week.
2. Attempt your deep-breathing exercise during a stressful time this week.
3. Create your own personal guided imagery script, and attempt to use it this week. Bring it to the next session.