**TRAILS**™

Three Relaxation Skills

When we are anxious, our bodies release chemicals that prepare us to confront or flee from danger. These changes prepare us for survival from physical threats, but they do little to help against modern stressors such as presentations, meeting new people, or long days at work or school. We can use relaxation skills such as imagery, deep breathing, and progressive muscle relaxation to help combat the uncomfortable physical symptoms associated with anxiety.

Fight

Flight
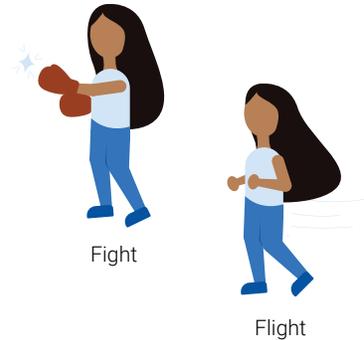
Imagery

Think about some of your favorite and least favorite places. Some places instantly cause stress, and others fill us with a feeling of calm and relaxation. Our brain creates an emotional reaction just by thinking about these places- we don't actually need to be in them. The imagery technique uses this to our advantage.

1. Make sure you're somewhere quiet without too much noise or distraction. You'll need a few minutes to just be in your head.

2. Think of a place or a situation that's calm to you. Some examples are the beach, hiking on a mountain, relaxing at home with a friend, or playing with a pet.

3. Paint a picture of the calming place in your mind. Don't just think of the place briefly- imagine every little detail. Go through each of your senses and imagine how they feel. Here's an example using a beach:

Sight: The sun is high in the sky and I'm surrounded by white sand. There's no one else around. The greenish-blue water is calm.

Sound: I can hear the deep pounding and splashing of the waves. There are seagulls somewhere in the background.

Touch: The sun is warm on my back, but a breeze cools me down just enough. I can feel sand moving between my toes.

Taste: The lemonade I'm drinking is sweet and tart.

Smell: I can smell the saltwater and fresh air.

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Deep Breathing

It's natural to take long deep breaths when relaxed. However, during the fight-or-flight response, breathing becomes rapid and shallow. Deep breathing sends messages to the brain to begin calming the body. Practice will make your body respond more efficiently to deep breathing in the future. It helps to do deep breathing 2-5 minutes every night, even if you aren't particularly stressed.
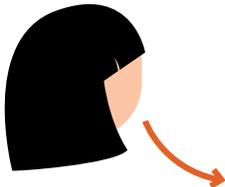
Steps to Deep Breathing
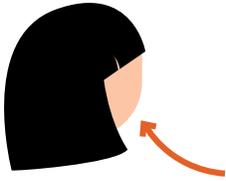
1. Breathe in slowly. Count in your head and make sure the inward breath lasts at least 5 seconds. Pay attention to the feeling of the air filling your lungs.

2. Hold your breath for 5 to 10 seconds (again, keep count). You don't want to feel uncomfortable, but it should last quite a bit longer than an ordinary breath.

3. Breathe out very slowly for 5 to 10 seconds (count!). Pretend like you're breathing through a straw to a yourself down. Try using a real straw to practice.

4. Repeat the breathing process until you feel calmer.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

During the fight-or-flight response the tension in our muscles increases. This can lead to a feeling of stiffness or even back and neck pain. Progressive muscle relaxation teaches us to be aware of this tension so we can identify and address stress of which we may not have even been aware.

1. Find a private and quiet location. You should lie or sit down somewhere comfortable.

2. The idea of this technique is to intentionally tense each muscle, and then to release the tension. Let's practice with your hands:

   - Tense the muscles in your fingers as hard as you can. This will make your hand go into a claw shape. Notice the feeling of tension in your hand. Hold this tension for 5 seconds.

   - Release the tension from your fingers. Let them relax. Notice how your fingers feel differently after you release the tension.

   - Tense the muscles all throughout your hand to create a fist. Notice the feeling of tension. Hold this tension for 5 seconds.

   - Release the tension from your fist and notice the feeling of relief in your hand.

3. Follow this pattern of tensing and releasing tension all throughout your body. Follow the path through each body muscle group:

   1. Feet

   2. Legs

   3. Stomach

   4. Chest

   5. Back

   6. Shoulders

   7. Arms

   8. Neck

   9. Face

Last edited: 04/21/2020

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