

USEFUL TECHNIQUES

Progressive Relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation teaches the relaxation of muscles through a two-step process. The first step is to tense a group of muscle, and the second step is to release the tension and notice the difference between a tense and relaxed state. This technique is helpful to lower stress and overall tension and to reduce anxiety. When individuals are in a constant state of anxiety or hyper-alertness they may not even notice the tension in their bodies. This technique helps individual to distinguish between tense and relaxed muscles and allows them to notice when they are tense.



This technique involves the tensing and relaxing of different muscle groups in the body. Persons with any medical conditions such as pulled muscles or broken bones should consult a medical practitioner before attempting the technique. The technique should never result in any physical discomfort or pain.

Step 1: Tension

Apply muscle tension to a specific part of the body, for example the left hand. Take a slow, deep breath and then squeeze the muscles as hard as you can for about 5 seconds. It is important to really feel the tension in the muscles, which may even cause a bit of discomfort or shaking. It is easy to accidentally tense the surrounding muscles as well, but focus on tensing only the muscles in the targeted body part.

Step 2: Relaxation

After about 5 seconds let the tension flow out of the tensed muscles and exhale. Feel the muscles become loose and limp as the tension flows out of it. Notice the difference between the tension and relaxation – this is the most important part of the exercise. Remain in this relaxed state for about 15 seconds, and then move on to the next targeted muscle group.

In order to make it easy to remember to cover all of the major muscle groups, start at the feet and systematically move upwards. For example:

- Foot (curl toes downward)
- Lower leg and foot (tighten calf muscle by pulling toes toward you)
- Entire leg (squeeze thigh muscle)

(Repeat on other side of the body)

- Hand (clench your fist)
- Entire arm (tighten your biceps by drawing your forearm up towards your shoulder while clenching your fist)

(Repeat on other side of the body)

- Buttocks (tighten by pulling buttocks together)
- Stomach (suck your stomach in)
- Chest (tighten by taking a deep breath)
- Neck and shoulders (raise your shoulders up to your ears)
- Mouth (open your mouth wide enough to stretch the hinges of your jaw)
- Eyes (clench your eyelids tightly shut)
- Forehead (raise your eyebrows as far as you can)

It is helpful to guide the client through this process the first time, but after that the client can practice it alone at home.

Quick tense and relax

Once a client is familiar with this method and has practiced it for a while the client can learn the short version of progressive relaxation which targets larger groups of muscles. These muscle groups are:

- Lower limbs (legs and feet)
- Stomach and chest
- Arms, shoulders and neck
- Face

Instead of working just one muscle group at a time a group of muscles are being targeted. Remember to relax the muscles when exhaling. The client can also choose an anchor word to say each time he or she relaxes the muscles, for example: peace, relax, calm, etc. The anchor word will become associated with the relaxation and can eventually be used in any situation without actual muscle relaxation to trigger the relaxation response.

Release only

Another way to make the exercise even shorter is to relax the muscles without tensing them first. This will only work if the client practices muscle tensing and relaxing often, because it relies on the client's ability to know the difference between a tense and relaxed state. The release only technique can be just as relaxing as the tense-release method, but the client can practice this anyway and at any time that is safe to do so.

Guided Imagery for Safe Place

Guided imagery involves the use of sensory imagination in combination with relaxation exercises to help the client relax. The Safe Place is not a “real” place, it is a place in the client’s imagination where he or she feels completely safe and relaxed, and where the client can spend a few moments to reconnect with their own internal resources (safety, calmness, feelings of strength, etc.) when the counselling evokes intense or disturbing emotions. It provides the client with containment.



The counsellor should take care to be permissive in this exercise and not to be prescriptive in terms of the imagery used. The client must have enough scope to create their own experience. For example, while many people believe a setting on the beach to be calm and relaxing that may not be so for everyone. One person’s safe place can be another person’s nightmare.

Example script:

Pauses of a 2 – 3 seconds are indicated with ...

Use a calm and soothing voice, but not unnatural.

Just go ahead and make yourself comfortable in that chair, shifting in whatever way necessary to be physically comfortable as possible. And just notice your breathing. And notice how you breathe... perhaps short, shallow breaths, or perhaps a little deeper... in any event, allow your breathing to become a little deeper, adjusting it so that you breathe deeply and comfortably... and notice the pauses between each exhale and inhale... and make them just the right duration so that you are most comfortable... breathing deeply and comfortably...

And go ahead and place your attention on the muscles in your body, perhaps scanning your body quickly to detect those areas that are most tense... and many you want to work from the top down, so start with your head and relax the muscles on your forehead...perhaps moving them around a bit so that you know what they feel like when they... relax completely... and the muscles in the cheeks are often tense, so go

ahead and relax them completely... and the muscles around the eyes can relax too, so that it is not even necessary to keep those eyes open, so just let them close down, knowing that you can open them anytime you want... all the while your breathing becomes more and more comfortable...

And the muscles in the neck can relax even more... the shoulder muscles... and all the other muscles too can relax, becoming heavy and tired, limp and loose, as tension disappears from them...

And while you are so deeply relaxed, you can imagine in your mind's eye and place of your own where you are completely safe and comfortable... it can be a real place or perhaps a place that you prepare now in your mind... either way, it is place made only for you where you are completely safe and everything is possible... and as you take a few moments to create this place, you can become even more relaxed and comfortable, breathing deeply and comfortably... and when you are ready you can just find yourself there now, in this place made only for you, where you are completely safe and comfortable, where no-one else can enter unless you invite them...

And perhaps as you move about this place, you can notice the things you see there... perhaps there are soothing colours or shapes... things that cause you to relax...

And notice the feeling of the air on your skin, the temperature just the way you like it...

Perhaps the texture of the ground beneath your feet as you move around...

And there could be sounds that are important to you...

As you smell something really pleasant...

And become more aware of how good this place allows you to feel... inside... and notice that feel-good-feeling as it grows and expands, filling you from the inside out...and some people like to squeeze this feeling all the way through so that it fills them completely...

And how do you feel?

And where do you feel this feel-good-feeling in your body the strongest?

And what does it look like, perhaps it has a shape? A colour?

And is there a word that describes this feel-good-feeling the best for you?

And is there a word that best describes this safe place for you? (trigger word)

And as you continue to enjoy this experience for your own benefit, it is good to know that you can always return to this safe place at any time if it is beneficial, necessary and safe to do so. All you need to do is think of (trigger word), say (trigger word) and go there in your imagination. And if at any time during our sessions together you need the safety of this place, you can go there. And if any time during our sessions I say (trigger word), you can go there immediately, experiencing all the benefits that your own inner self prepares for you.

And when you are ready, you can feel the chair beneath you and slowly come back to this room, opening your eyes when you are ready.

Perhaps you want to stretch?

How do you feel?

What was that like for you?

Dissociated Re-experiencing

As a client is telling the story of what happened the client is likely to experience emotional and physiological distress. This is different for each client. Clients are encouraged to tolerate this distress rather than avoid it and to continue with their story, but if the degree of distress experienced becomes intolerable for the client, the client can be encouraged to adopt a “third person view” of events in order to continue. This can involve obtaining physical distance or safety from the event in the client’s imagination and usually results in greater emotional distance, reducing the level of distress and allowing the client to continue.

There are various ways in which the counsellor can help the client obtain a third person view of the events as they are happening. It is important to distinguish between the client recalling a memory of the event which is distressing, and the client experiencing an abreaction which is a re-living of the event as if it is happening right now. Usually when a client recalls the memory some emotional disturbance may be present, but the client may be able to tolerate this distress. In the case of an abreaction the client may react quite heavily and if the counsellor is not prepared for this it can be a shock. Abreaction is dealt with in the following section.

The movie screen and variations

Imagine that all of this is happening as if in a movie theatre. Now step outside of the movie and find yourself in the audience watching the movie and seeing it on the screen. Sit as far away from the movie screen as is necessary for you to observe what is happening in the movie without too much discomfort. Now, what is happening?

Move even further back into the audience so that the screen becomes smaller and the sound softer.

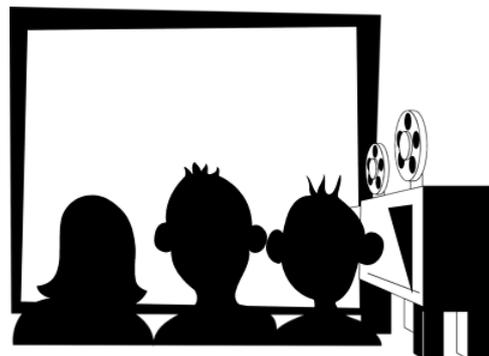
Adjust the colour of the movie and make it black and white.

Adjust the focus slightly so that it goes very slightly out of focus.

Turn off the sound completely.

Have some popcorn.

Add some comical music.



The plate of armoured glass and variations

In your imagination immediately find yourself outside of the scene and watching from the outside. Imagine a thick, powerful plate of armoured glass between you and what is happening – nothing can harm you from where you stand. Now what is happening?

Reinforce the plate of glass with a second plate of armoured glass, even thicker than the previous one.

Build a wall between yourself and what is happening, and find a small hole in the wall through which you can peek at what is happening.

Drone helicopter

Imagine that you find yourself somewhere very far from the event, hundreds of kilometres away, and that you have sent a drone helicopter with a camera to observe the events. You are now observing it on a small screen in front of you as you control the drone and let it view things from all angles, know that you are here and safe. And now what is happening?

View from a train

Imagine that you are a passenger on a train, watching out the window as the scenery moves by. It's just scenery. It's old stuff. Just watch it as it moves past you and feel it losing its grip on you. And now what is happening?

Old movie

Imagine you are watching this on your television at home and it's an old movie – it happened 10 years ago anyway. And you know what it's like when you watch such an old movie? You already know what's going to happen. You already know that you survive. The scenes may still be upsetting, but it's old stuff. And now what is happening?

Dealing with Abreaction

An abreaction is an intense emotional experience in which the client re-experiences the traumatic memory as if it is happening right now. It is considered a normal potential part of working with trauma and should not be viewed as either mandatory or unnecessary. The counsellor should accept it, if present, as an integral part of the client's subjective response during the processing of traumatic material (Shapiro, 2001).

It is the counsellor's duty to provide emotional containment and safety during an abreaction and if a client's emotional distress becomes intolerable or unproductive the counsellor should help the client to terminate the abreaction. Some clients may

display clear distress by crying or sobbing, but are sufficiently contained to continue telling the story. It is important not to terminate an abreaction too soon, especially if the client feels safe and able to continue. An abreaction may be a window of opportunity for the processing of traumatic memories, but it is important that the counsellor is appropriately trained to work with an abreaction.

Guidelines for dealing with an abreaction:

1. Don't panic. The client is already experiencing distress and if the counsellor panics the client's distress is likely to increase.
2. Don't touch a client who is abreacting, even though it may be very tempting to provide comfort. When a client experiences an abreaction and the counsellor touch the client, the touch may become anchored and associated with the trauma. In future, a similar touch may then trigger the abreaction as it is associated with the trauma on a subconscious level.
3. Say to the client: "The scene fades and you focus on your breathing. Feel the chair beneath you and know that you are safe. Go to your safe place now." This may need to be repeated, and the counsellor must say this in a comforting, calm but authoritative voice.

Clients may be concerned about their experience of abreacting and may ask the counsellor about this. It is important to normalise any concerns or fears by explaining to the client that an abreaction is a normal reaction to an abnormal event (trauma) and the abreaction is the release of the emotions that forms part of the traumatic memory.