



Relaxation Training: Breathing Retraining, Deep Muscle Relaxation, Differential Relaxation

Breathing Retraining

This chapter will describe breathing retraining and relaxation training. Not everyone will need this in therapy. If you are using the SIT program, it will be helpful to you. If you do not need or already know about this topic, you may skip to the next section. Most of us realize that our breathing affects the way that we feel. For example, when we are upset, people may tell us to take a deep breath and calm down. However, taking a deep breath often does not help. Instead, in order to calm down, one needs to take a normal breath and exhale slowly.

Your therapist will teach you breathing techniques. Here is how it works. First, take in a *normal* breath rather than a deep breath, inhale normally through your nose. Unless we are exercising vigorously, we ought to try to breathe through our noses. After inhaling normally, concentrate on the exhalation and drag it out. While slowly exhaling, say the word *calm* silently to yourself while you are exhaling. *Calm* is a good word to use because in our culture it is already associated with nice things. If we are upset and someone helps us to 'calm down', usually it is associated with comfort and support. It also sounds nice and can be dragged out to match the long, slow exhalation: c-a-a-a-a-a-l-m.

In addition to concentrating on slow exhalation while saying *Calm* to yourself, you need to slow down your breathing. Very often, when people become frightened or upset, they feel like they need more air and may therefore hyperventilate. Hyperventilation, however does not have a calming effect. In fact it generates anxious feelings. Unless we are preparing for one of the three *F*'s (i.e., fight, freeze, flee) in the face of a real danger, we often don't need as much air as we are taking in. When we hyperventilate and take in more air, it signals our bodies to prepare for one of the three *F*'s and to

keep it fueled with oxygen. This is similar to a runner taking deep breaths to fuel her body with oxygen before a race and continuing to breathe deeply and quickly throughout the race. Usually, when we hyperventilate, though, we are tricking our bodies. What we really need to do is to slow down our breathing and take in *less* air. We do this by pausing between breaths to space them out more. After your slowed exhalation, literally hold your breath for a count of four before you inhale the next breath. Repeat the entire sequence 10 to 15 times, for 10—15 breaths, or until it feels right for you. You can refer to the *Breathing Retraining Outline* (Figure 8.1). You should also practice the breathing retraining at least twice per day, as well as when you are feeling particularly tense or distressed throughout the day. It is a skill that you can know how to do but not be any good at unless you practice.

If you have asthma, you will probably not feel comfortable pausing without air in your lungs. If this is true, take a normal breath, then pause to a count of four, then exhale slowly. This way, you may pause (hold your breath) with air in your lungs. This may be more comfortable for you.

Purpose:

- Slow down breathing
- Decrease amount of oxygen in blood
- With practice, decrease anxiety

Breathing Instructions:

1. Take a normal breath in through your nose with your mouth closed.
2. Exhale slowly with your mouth closed.
3. On exhaling, say the word *Calm* or *Relax* very slowly, for example:
c-a-a-a-a-a-l-m or r-e-e-e-e-l-a-a-a-a-a-x
4. Count slowly to 4 and then take the next inhalation.
5. Practice this exercise several times a day, taking 10 to 15 breaths at each practice.

Figure 8.1. Breathing Retraining Outline

Relaxation Training

This technique is called Deep Muscle Relaxation and it is designed to help you manage your anxiety and tension. Your therapist will teach you to sequentially tense and relax various muscles in your body while you pay

attention to the feelings associated with tension and relaxation. In addition to learning how to relax, you will also learn how to recognize tension in your muscles. You will be asked to produce tension in your muscles and then release the tension all at once. This allows the muscles to become even more relaxed when you release this tension. It's like a pendulum: if we push it, it will go to the other side, but if we pull it back then let it go, it goes over further. Also, in order to reduce the tension in your muscles, you must first notice it. By tensing/relaxing, tensing/relaxing you will be able to notice the contrast between these two states and will be able to detect the early stages of tension when it is easier to do something about it.

Do you remember what it was like for you when you first learned to ride a bike or drive a stick-shift car? Remember when you were first learning? It was difficult to remember when to do everything and in what order. You had to walk yourself through all the steps very slowly. At first these new tasks didn't feel comfortable to you and you might have felt that you could never learn to drive or ride a bike; but eventually with persistence and practice you mastered these skills, and can probably do them now automatically. Relaxation is a skill that requires practice as do other skills. You can know what to do but not be any good at it unless you practice. If you practice every day you will find that you are able to relax very easily and almost automatically when you say to yourself '*Relax*' or '*Calm.*'

When you are relaxing or tensing, you may experience some unusual feelings such as a floating sensation, heat in your muscles, tingling in your fingers, or very heavy muscles and limbs. These are signs that your body is beginning to relax and your muscles are loosening up. It is also important that you *go with the process* and that you do not fight what your body may be feeling. However, sometimes it happens that women who have been assaulted have an intrusive thought or an image while they are relaxing. If this happens to you, try to keep your eyes closed, let the thoughts pass through your mind, and refocus on the muscle group. If you are feeling too distressed, open your eyes to orient yourself and then close your eyes again when you are feeling more comfortable.

When you tense and relax each muscle group, it is important that you tense only the muscles that you are focusing on. When you tense them, only tense them to a moderate degree. Don't strain your muscles to the point of discomfort or pain.

Your therapist will review with you the muscle groups that you are going to be tensing and relaxing. See Table 8.1 for the muscle groups list.

Table 8.1.**Muscle Groups List for Deep Muscle Relaxation**

- ❑ Clench fists
- ❑ Bend hands backward at wrists
- ❑ Flex biceps muscles
- ❑ Push shoulders back into chair
- ❑ Hunch shoulders up towards ears
- ❑ Tilt head to left shoulder
- ❑ Tilt head to right shoulder
- ❑ With head down, tuck chin towards chest
- ❑ Press your head back against the chair
- ❑ Breathe air in deeply through lungs, and hold for a few seconds
- ❑ Tense stomach by contracting muscles as if hit in stomach
- ❑ Wrinkle up forehead and brow
- ❑ Close eyes tightly
- ❑ Open mouth wide
- ❑ Purse lips
- ❑ Bear down slightly on back teeth
- ❑ Tense buttocks
- ❑ Arch back
- ❑ Stretch out right leg and bend toes back
- ❑ Stretch out left leg and bend toes back
- ❑ Stretch out right leg and point toes away from body
- ❑ Stretch our left leg and point toes away from body
- ❑ Curl up toes in shoes

When your body gets relaxed, your mind also gets relaxed. In order to enhance this process, after you have relaxed all major muscle groups, you should imagine a pleasant scene. Just allow yourself to relax as much as you would like and focus on each muscle group. After the completion of each

major muscle group (e.g., all neck exercises), do the breathing exercises. Proceed in this manner through all of the muscle groups.

Can you think of a scene that is particularly pleasant for you to imagine?
Can you describe that scene?

Some examples of a pleasant scene that others have used include walking or sitting on a beach, sitting in front of a roaring fire, walking through the woods, or listening to music. Please imagine this scene as vividly as possible, bringing in the smells, sounds, colors, and textures that are around you as you imagine it. Stay with that image in your private sanctuary and allow your muscles to go limp and relax. Breathe slowly. This is your time to relax. You will not be hurried. Keep your eyes closed and imagine your pleasant scene. Go to that private sanctuary and see the colors around you, inhale the pleasant scents, listen to the sounds and relax further and further. At the end, count backwards from 4 to 1. On the count of 4, move your legs and your feet. On the count of 3, move your arms and your hands. On the count of 2, move your head and your neck, and on the count of 1, open your eyes, feeling refreshed and relaxed. Take your time opening your eyes, you have been relaxing and there is no need to rush.

How did it feel? Did you have any difficulty with any of the muscle groups? Relaxation can be more easily achieved with closed eyes, but if that makes you very uncomfortable, go ahead and keep them open. Find a quiet place for practicing relaxation exercises. Optimal times during the day to practice relaxation are in the morning before getting out of bed, in the afternoon or upon return from work, in the early evening while relaxing after supper, or at bedtime. Initially, we discourage people from listening to the tape and practicing relaxation before bedtime because you may fall asleep and fail to learn relaxation skills. Once you have learned to relax, you can use this as a strategy to help you get to sleep.

Cue-Controlled Relaxation

Cue-controlled relaxation is another relaxation technique. Cue-controlled relaxation can be used daily to reduce tension in situations that remind you of the assault. When you feel stressed out or anxious, which of your muscles are first affected? This week, pay attention to which muscles in your body feel tense, and use this tension as a cue to use your breathing exercises and relaxation. For example, suppose you had a difficult day at work because you were unable to concentrate and you notice that you are clenching your jaw. This will be your cue to start your breathing exercises and to say your cue word (e.g., 'calm' or 'relax') to help you reduce your tension. Do you notice any muscle group in which there is tension right now, or not as relaxed as the

rest? Practice breathing, using your cue word, and allow your muscles to go limp and relax for about 5 minutes.

Differential Muscle Relaxation

There is one more relaxation skill to teach you called differential relaxation. We call it differential relaxation because you will be learning to relax specific muscle groups that are not essential for the activity you engage in when you are tense. You may notice that your muscles are feeling tense much of the day. This is because you are anxious and overly alert a good deal of the day. In actuality, when you engage in various activities, you only need to use those muscle groups directly related to that activity. For example, if you are sitting and watching television there is no need to have tension in the muscles in your face, arms, legs, stomach, and buttocks. However, in order to sit upright you need to slightly tense the muscles in your neck and torso.

Let us run a couple of experiments to demonstrate this principle. First, focus on the amount of tension that you feel in your muscles as you sit in the chair. What muscles are feeling tense right now? What are the essential muscle groups that you need to sit in the chair?

Even when we are using muscles for an activity, we do not need a high degree of tension, say the amount when we are tensing the muscles during deep muscle relaxation. Try to keep the minimal amount of tension required for that activity. Now, try to reduce the degree of tension that you feel in the muscle groups that are not essential for you to sit in the chair, and try to allow the other muscles to relax completely. Do you notice a difference?

Next, write your name on a piece of paper and use only the essential muscles necessary for this activity. What muscles are you able to relax while you are writing? What is the essential muscle group that you need to write your name? Only the muscles in your hand and lower arm are tense when writing. Now, stand up and notice the essential muscles that you need to maintain your balance and posture. What muscles are you able to relax while you are standing there? What are the essential muscle groups that you need to maintain your balance? Only the muscles in your shoulders, back, and legs are tense when you stand. Note that this tension is minimal and it is not necessary to tense other muscles, such as those in your arms, buttocks, or face, to stand.

Now, walk around the room and notice what muscle groups are essential to walk and maintain your balance. It is only necessary to tense the muscles in your shoulders, back, hips, and legs. Note that this tension is minimal and you do not need to tense the muscles in your arms or face, for example, to walk around the room.

The idea is to keep the minimal amount of tension in your muscles to complete whatever activity you are engaging in and to allow the rest of your muscles to relax completely. During daily life, we have a lot of unnecessary tension. For example, when we are driving a car, we need some tension in the muscles of our hands and arms. However, some people report “white knuckling it,” especially in traffic. All this does is increase our general level of tension. If you can learn how to let much of this tension go, you can go through life more relaxed and comfortable. Be aware of the tension you carry around with you and work on reducing it.

Remember, in order to be successful in your attempt to relax, you have to practice these relaxation techniques daily for a while. Only after repeated practice will you be able to really use them well when you need them. So, make a time every day for your relaxation. Discuss with your therapist any problems that you may experience while using these relaxation techniques.