

the anxiety, worry & depression workbook

65 exercises, worksheets & tips to improve mood and feel better

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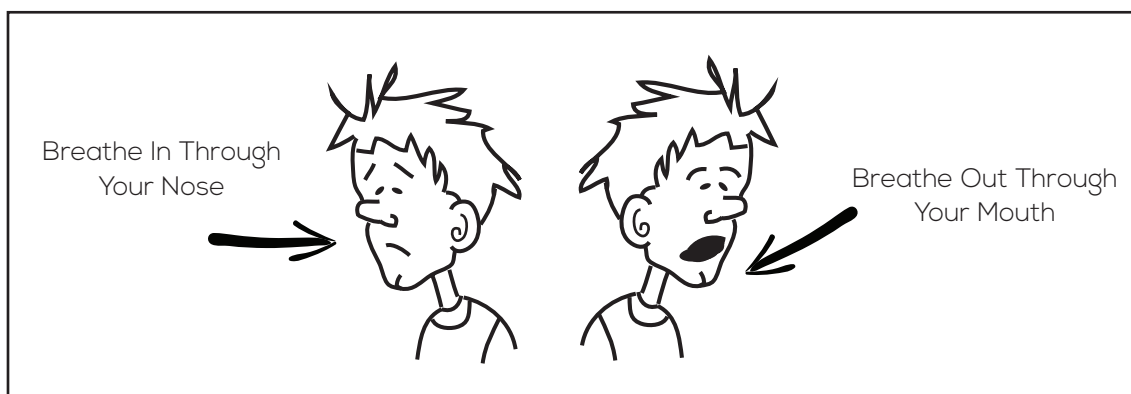
Chapter

Relaxation

Relaxation is an important part of coping with anxiety. Being relaxed is the antithesis of being anxious. This certainly isn't surprising, but do you know that it's also important in dealing with depression? Interestingly, when we used only relaxation techniques with people who suffered from generalized anxiety disorder and felt depressed, their mood improved significantly despite the fact we weren't directly addressing their depression (Borkovec, Abel, & Newman, 1995; Borkovec, Newman, Pincus, & Lytle, 2002).

When using the following relaxation techniques, please remember the blue monkeys (see Chapter 2). In other words, gently move toward relaxation rather than pushing away from anxiety. There are several relaxation scripts to follow. You have three choices. First, you can read the scripts, practice them, and eventually remember what to do. Second, you can read the scripts yourself or have someone read the scripts and record them (see Therapist Chapter 12 for ways to make recordings). Third, you can purchase the recordings of these exercises by going to this webpage: AnxietyStLouisPsychologist.com/free.

Perhaps the most common relaxation technique is breathing. You may have learned to breathe deeply from your diaphragm, or to breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth, or you may have learned to count to a certain number as you breathe in and out. If these work for you, that's great! These techniques are not wrong. However, even if these techniques work well for you, substituting command words with process words (e.g., "breathing" vs. "breathe"), or states, may make the techniques even more effective. Even when using process words with breathing techniques, many people get performance anxiety about whether they are doing it right, thereby increasing their anxiety or impeding relaxation. Still others may find the techniques of limited effectiveness due to the effort involved. With mindful breathing, there is no performance and it's basically effortless, so there is no anxiety.



EXERCISE

Mindful Breathing Plus

1. Read the following and apply it as you are reading:

Making no effort to breathe in any certain way, instead just observing your breathing [pause]. Following your breathing [pause]. As you begin focusing on your nose, noticing that as you breathe in, the air feels cool, and as you breathe out, the air feels warmer [pause]. Feeling the cool air expanding your lungs as you inhale and noticing the warmer air escaping through your nose as your lungs relax. Noticing if you can hear the sound of the air coming in and out of your nose [pause]. Noticing that just after you breathe out, your body is still before you breathe in. Enjoying that quiet pause. Noticing how still and relaxed your body is between breaths.

2. Closing your eyes, doing the same as above, but instead of thinking of the words, focusing on the raw sensations of your breathing. That is, focusing on the sound, feeling, and physical sensations of your breathing, without labels, like a baby would.
3. Go back to the words you found most relaxing in Chapter 4. Integrate the word or words you found most relaxing into your breathing. For instance, if your best word was “releasing,” think this word with your breathing: thinking “re” as you breathe in, “lease” as you breathe out, and “ing” during the quiet pause. Or, if you chose “peace” and “soft,” you can think “peace” as you inhale, “soft” as you exhale, and just enjoy the quiet pause. Alternatively, you could think “still” or another favorite word during the quiet pause. Create your own two- and three-word phrases to coincide with the three phases of breathing (e.g., “God-is-peace,” “Sha-lom,” “Love-to-all”).
4. Instead of thinking words, visualize colors. As you breathe in, you can choose a relaxing color. Preferably pick a cool color such as blue or aqua, but any color you like is fine. Alternatively, visualize yourself breathing in fresh, clear, oxygenated air. As you breathe out, breathing out a warm color such as yellow or red. Or think about what color your anxiety feels like and breathing out that color. Avoid forcing it out—instead, just allowing the air to escape little by little.
5. During the next quiet pause, thinking the number “5.” Thinking “4” during the next quiet pause, and thinking one lower number for each quiet pause between breaths, counting all the way down to zero. When you get to zero, taking one more breath and then opening your eyes. Alternatively, switch to another relaxation strategy.

Experiment by trying various combinations of the above strategies and comparing them with simply observing your breathing.

Progressive relaxation is likely the most effective relaxation technique (Bernstein & Borkovec, 1973). It involves systematically tensing and releasing 16 muscle groups. You learn to feel the difference between tension and relaxation and are able to lower your adaptation level (e.g., the amount of tension you use to get through the day). This leads to significantly improved physical and mental health, including a positive effect on sleep, tension headaches, blood pressure, pain, anxiety, sexual satisfaction, premenstrual syndrome, and irritability. It is complex and research has shown that learning it from a trained therapist is much more effective than learning it in a group or on your own from a book.

The next four exercises will be useful in reducing your muscle tension. However, for the best results, it is recommended that you learn progressive relaxation from a therapist who is well-trained in the procedure.

EXERCISE

Sponge (Optional Recording)

It is best if you begin seated with both feet on the floor or lying down.

Closing your eyes and noticing where your body is touching the surfaces beneath you. Feeling the floor beneath your feet, the couch beneath your legs and seat, and the surface or surfaces behind you. Visualizing, imagining, that the surfaces beneath and behind you are like sponges that, instead of absorbing water, absorb tension from your body [pause]. Making no effort to relax. Instead just feeling the absorbing power of the spongy surfaces beneath you [pause]. Allowing gravity to help drain the tension from your body [pause]. Allowing your breathing to help. Each time you breathe in, the tension is loosening, and each time you breathe out, you're feeling a little more relaxed as the tension drains into the spongy surfaces beneath you.

EXERCISE

Tin Man To Scarecrow

This exercise involves tensing all the major muscle groups in the body, like a tin man, and then releasing them, feeling like a scarecrow. Do tense your muscles hard, but, instead of thinking of making them as hard as steel (like Superman), aim for tin to avoid straining your muscles. This should never cause pain.

The following is a list of all the muscle groups. Try these individually as you read them. If you don't feel they are tense enough, you can simply tighten these muscles internally.

- **Arms:** Make fists and press your elbows back into the surface behind you or beneath you. Alternatively (or as well), you can press your elbows into your sides.
- **Face:** Furrow your brow as if confused, scrunch up your nose and cheeks, and press your teeth together lightly (don't clench). You can also press your tongue to the roof of your mouth.
- **Neck:** Bring your chin down toward your chest while pulling your neck back at the same time. It should feel as if the front and back of your neck are in a tug-of-war.
- **Torso:** Take a deep breath, high into your lungs, while simultaneously pulling your shoulders back and tightening your abdomen.
- **Legs and Feet:** Lift your legs while simultaneously pulling them in toward yourself. At the same time bend your ankles to bring your feet and toes back toward your shin.

Get ready to tense all the muscles in your body like a tin man. Tense them now. Feel the tension. Notice how the tension feels. Notice where all the tension is coming from. Hold the tension for about eight seconds. Releasing into scarecrow. Loose, soft, no joints. Noticing the difference between how your muscles feel now as compared to before [pause], limp and soft. No joints like a scarecrow. Making no effort to relax, just allowing your body to feel released, loose, soft, and relaxed. Enjoying the relaxation for 30–40 seconds and repeat the tin-man-to-scarecrow cycle one or two more times.

If you have more time, you can work through the muscle groups separately.

EXERCISE

Differential Relaxation

1. Noticing how your book or device feels in your hands, staying in the same position while letting go of any tension you don't need. Allowing your muscles to be as loose and soft as they will be.
2. Move to a position such that you will have less tension. This includes putting down your book, perhaps leaning back against the surface beneath you or uncrossing your legs. Once you put the book down, allowing your muscles to be as loose and soft as they will be.
3. Put the book down and stand with the least amount of tension. Where do you need no tension at all while standing? You need no tension in your hands, arms, shoulders, and face. Letting go completely in those areas. Using the least amount everywhere else. You need the most tension in your legs, but, even in your legs, letting go of about half of the tension there. If you aren't swaying, letting go even more.
4. Soon I'm going to ask you to walk at your normal pace with the least amount of tension. When you do, let your arms swing freely with no tension in them or your face and shoulders. Put your book down and begin your walk now.
5. Next I will ask you to walk very fast as if you are in a big hurry, but without running. The only tension you will add is slightly more tension in your legs. Walk in this way now. What did you notice? Were you surprised at how little extra energy or tension you needed to walk very fast? Next time you are in a hurry, overwhelmed, or otherwise stressed, remember how little tension you needed to walk very fast. We often use way more tension than we need when we are running behind or feeling overwhelmed.
6. Put a question mark on several sticky notes. Put them in places you will see frequently and places that you associate with stress. When you see these reminders, think, "Do I need all this tension?" or "What's the least amount of tension I can use?" If you have more of a problem with fatigue than with tension, substitute the word "energy" for tension in the above sentences.

EXERCISE

Cheap Biofeedback

Do you have tension in your face? When alone, driving, or with people with whom you're comfortable sharing your goals for being more relaxed, wear a piece of tape on your forehead. If you have bangs, you can wear the tape comfortably anywhere. If not, perhaps you can create bangs to hide your tape. You'll feel it when you raise your brows or furrow your brow and it will remind you to soften those areas.

Also, very inexpensive thermal biofeedback helps people to relax. Remember mood rings? Biodots or biosquares work the same way except you typically attach them to your fingertips. They cost less than \$20 for 100 online. Aim to change the color by thinking of warming your fingertips. Autogenic training involves visualizing and imagining warming the fingers and arms, then eventually the feet and legs. It also includes imagining that they are heavy. This has been shown to be effective in increasing circulation and is particularly helpful in treating migraine headaches. It is suggested to learn this from a trained therapist, but imagining your hands and arms as being heavy and warm won't harm you.

EXERCISE

Clouds (Optional Recording)

This next exercise is imagery of lying on a raft becoming progressively more and more relaxed with each passing cloud. If you happen to be afraid of water, visualize yourself on the sand or in a lounge chair.

Visualizing yourself lying on a large, dry air mattress. You can be in a deep or shallow pool, on a pond, or on a lake. It can be somewhere that you've been before, somewhere you've seen in a movie or a photo, or a place you make up in your imagination. Begin by feeling the warmth of the sun with a nice, gentle breeze [pause]. As you look up into the sky, it's mostly blue, but you're noticing a few white fluffy clouds floating across your field of vision [pause]. Noticing a cloud shaped like the number 9. As you watch it floating through the sky, you feel a little more relaxed [pause]. Noticing a cloud shaped like the number 8 moving across the sky and feeling more floaty [pause]. As you see the 7 drifting across the sky, feeling a sense of peace and tranquility [pause]. Watching the number 6 float across the sky as your sense of peace and tranquility doubles [pause]. Noticing your body sinking into the raft as you watch the cloud shaped like the number 5 drifting across the sky [pause]. Allowing your sense of floating to double as you watch the 4 following the 5 [pause]. Just watching the 3 and enjoying how you feel [pause]. Allowing the sense of sinking into the raft to double as you watch the 2 [pause]. Allowing the relaxation to double or becoming as relaxed as you'd like to be as you watch the 1 [pause]. Memorizing how you feel as you watch the cloud shaped like a zero move across the sky [pause].

EXERCISE**Balloons (Optional Recording)**

Use this exercise when you feel overwhelmed by your to-do list.

Visualizing that you are outdoors. This can be in your backyard, the park, or anywhere else outside. Imagining that you are holding a handful of helium balloons. Each balloon represents a different one of your tasks. Feeling a breeze on the back of your body. As you're holding this handful of balloons, thinking about what you are going to be doing after this [pause]. Taking the balloon that represents what you are doing next into your free hand. If the thing you're doing next is something you are looking forward to doing, make the balloon your favorite color. Letting go of the handful of balloons, watching them climb higher in the sky from the helium as the wind moves them farther and farther away. Seeing the balloons appearing smaller and smaller in your field of vision [pause]. Soon they are just a few little dots in the sky until they completely disappear. Focusing on your next event. If the balloon you're still holding is a task or worry, you're relaxing now, such that it is best to focus on the moment by letting go of this last balloon too. Watching it float up into the sky and drifting further away [pause]. Seeing it get smaller and smaller until it's just a dot in the sky before it disappears completely. When it disappears, focusing your attention on the moment, noticing the surfaces beneath you or switching to another relaxation strategy.

EXERCISE**Brain Sink (Optional Recording)**

Visualizing that you have a sink in your brain. Visualizing that your worries are moving around in that sink. Imagining that you pull out the plug and the words drain out of your head. If you'd like, you can turn on the water and use the spraying function to help wash the thoughts out of the sink.

EXERCISE

Slowing Racing Thoughts With Imagery

Nothing in nature goes from fast to stop in an instant. Therefore, when we have racing thoughts, trying to stop them with a relaxation strategy rarely works. As you will read in the next chapter, it is important to catch anxiety and worry early in the spiral to prevent it from getting out of control. However, this group of imagery exercises can help you to reverse your spiral. By meeting the racing thoughts where they are, you can gradually slow them before using another coping strategy, including any of the relaxation exercises in this chapter. Next time you have racing thoughts, try these exercises.

Playground Merry-Go-Round

1. Visualize the big spinning disc with railings that you see at playgrounds.
2. Visualize yourself holding onto a rail and running as fast as you can with your thoughts.
3. Then hop on and think of your thoughts gradually slowing as the merry-go-round slows.
4. When it has almost stopped, hop off and visualize the merry-go-round becoming more and more distant.
5. Shift to being in the moment or using another relaxation strategy.

Sprint to Walk

1. Visualize yourself sprinting as fast as you can with your thoughts.
2. Now run—still fast, but not as fast as you can. Slow your thoughts accordingly.
3. Take it down to a jog.
4. Next slow to a fast walk.
5. Shift to walking slowly.
6. Move to the moment or continue visualizing yourself on a walk enjoying the great outdoors.

Old-Time Record Player (Optional Recording)

This may not be helpful if you were born after CDs, MP3s, and streaming became the norm. The idea is to imagine your racing thoughts on a 45rpm record playing at 78. Then lowering the speed to 45 and lowering the volume. Lower the speed down to 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ and turn the volume down gradually to off. Follow with a coping strategy of your choice. If you aren't familiar with these record players, think of thoughts recorded at a normal pace being played at a fast pace, then the pace at which they were recorded, and then slowly. Lower the volume with each slower speed.