

RELAXATION SCRIPTS

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May 2016

Relaxation training is an invaluable strategy in the CBT therapist's armoury, so there will be times when you encourage your patients to practice relaxation exercises between sessions. However, some of them will struggle to remember all the stages in a systematic relaxation exercise, others might be able to recall an exercise but have difficulty getting the pacing just right while some people get distracted and drift off task very easily. In these instances it can be really helpful to provide a recorded guide. There are various ways of doing this: in some departments a single person makes recordings that can be distributed to clients in general, some therapists make their own recordings for particular patients, making it more "bespoke", and sometimes patients are coached in making their own recordings. You need to decide what best suits you and the person with whom you are working.

As you will want to make as soothing a recording as possible, do choose a time when you (or your patient) are feeling reasonably relaxed and your voice is not strained and you are not hurried. Also - a regular breathing pattern is fundamental to achieving a relaxed state, so it can be good idea to begin with getting this right.

Preliminary regular breathing

This exercise is brief and simple. It prompts a relaxed breathing pattern.

Instructions:

*Find a comfortable position and let your body grow heavy.
Attend to your breathing for a moment just allowing this to be as natural as possible.
Try to breathe through your nose if you can, making your breathing smooth and even.*

On the next out-breath try to empty your lungs, right down to your diaphragm - as if you were breathing from your stomach.

Take a gentle in-breath counting slowly to five: one, two, three, four, five.

Imagine filling your lungs completely, right down to your diaphragm.

Breathe out slowly: one, two, three, four, five, six.

Imagine emptying your lungs.

Breathe in: one, two, three, four, five.

Breathe out slowly: one, two, three, four, five, six.

Breathe in: one, two, three, four, five.

Breathe out slowly: one, two, three, four, five, six.

Try to keep this pattern during your relaxation exercises.'

Relaxation Exercise: Progressive relaxation or deep relaxation

This exercise is based on Jacobsen's Progressive Muscular Relaxation (PMR) and it helps us distinguish between muscular tension and relaxation whilst instructing them us to relax at will. It is particularly useful for those who are so used to being tense that they find it difficult to even appreciate that they are tense! It is also an excellent exercise for people who struggle to let go of tension in the muscles and for those who need a step-by-step training because they are so unfamiliar with the sensations of relaxation. The procedure involves working through various muscle groups first tensing and then relaxing them. Exercises tend to start with the feet, working up through the body slowly and smoothly, letting the sensation of relaxation deepen at its own pace. However, if there were good reason to start elsewhere in the body it would be fine to do so.

People should be instructed to tense their muscles – but not to overdo this. The aim is to tighten muscles but not to strain. No-one should get pain or cramps!

Instructions:

First, get as comfortable as you can ... Lie flat on the floor with a pillow under your head, or snuggle in your chair ... If you wear glasses, remove them ... Kick off your shoes and loosen any tight clothing ... Relax your arms by your sides and have your legs uncrossed. Close your eyes, and don't worry if they flicker – this is quite usual. Don't worry if random thoughts enter your mind – this is also quite usual. Just let them go and then re-focus on relaxing.

(READ ONCE) You are beginning to relax Breathe out slowly ... Now, breathe in smoothly and deeply Now, breathe out slowly again, imagining yourself becoming heavier and heavier, sinking into the floor (or your chair) ... Keep breathing rhythmically, and feel a sense of relief and of letting go Try saying "relax" to yourself as you breathe out ... Breathe like this for a few moments more

Now, begin to tense and relax the muscles of your body ... Think of your feet ... Tense the muscles in your feet and ankles, curling your toes towards your head ... Gently stretch your muscles ... Feel the tension in your feet and ankles ... Hold it ... Now let go ... Let your feet go limp and floppy ... Feel the difference ... Feel the tension draining away from your feet ... Let your feet roll outwards and grow heavier and heavier ... Imagine that they are so heavy that they are sinking into the floor ... More and more relaxed ... Growing heavier and more relaxed ... (REPEAT)

Now, think about your calves ... Begin to tense the muscles in your lower legs ... If you are sitting, lift your legs up and hold them in front of you, feeling the tension ... Gently stretch the muscles Feel that tension ... Hold it ... Now release ... Let your feet touch the floor and let your legs go floppy and heavy ... Feel the difference ... Feel the tension leaving your legs, draining away from your calves ... Leaving your calves feeling heavy ... Draining away from your feet ... Leaving them feeling heavy and limp ... Imagine that your legs and feet are so heavy that they are sinking into the floor ... They feel limp and relaxed ... Growing more and more heavy and relaxed ... (REPEAT)

Think about your thigh muscles ... Tense them by pushing the tops of your legs together as hard as you can ... Feel the tension building ... Hold it ... Now, let your legs fall apart ... Feel the difference ... Feel the tension draining away from your legs ... They feel limp and heavy ... Your thighs feel heavy ... Your calves feel heavy ... Your feet feel heavy ... Imagine the tension draining away ... Leaving your legs ... Leaving them feeling limp and relaxed ... Leaving them

feeling so heavy that they are sinking into the floor or your chair ... Let the feelings of relaxation spread up from your feet ... Up through your legs ... Relaxing your hips and lower back ...

(REPEAT)

Now tense the muscles of your hips, and lower back by squeezing your buttocks together ... Arch your back, gently ... Feel the tension ... Hold the tension ... Now let it go ... Let your muscles relax ... Feel your spine supported again ... Feel the muscles relax ... Deeper and deeper ... More and more relaxed ... Growing heavier and heavier ... Your hips are relaxed ... Your legs are relaxed ... Your feet are heavy ... Tension is draining away from your body ...

(REPEAT)

Tense your stomach and chest muscles, imagine that you are expecting a punch in the stomach and prepare yourself for the impact ... Take in a breath, and as you do, pull in your stomach and feel the muscles tighten ... Feel your chest muscles tighten and become rigid ... Hold the tension ... Now slowly breathe out and let go of the tension ... Feel your stomach muscles relax ... Feel the tightness leave your chest ... As you breathe evenly and calmly, your chest and stomach should gently rise and fall ... Allow your breathing to become rhythmic and relaxed ... (REPEAT)

Now think about your hands and arms ... Slowly curl your fingers into two tight fists ... Feel the tension ... Now hold your arms straight out in front of you, still clenching your fists ... Feel the tension in your hands, your forearms and your upper arms ... Hold it ... Now, let go ... Gently drop your arms by your side and imagine the tension draining away from your arms ... Leaving your upper arms ... Leaving your forearms ... Draining away from your hands ... Your arms feel heavy and floppy ... Your arms feel limp and relaxed ... (REPEAT)

Think about the muscles in your shoulders ... Tense them by drawing up your shoulders towards your ears and pull them in towards your spine ... Feel the tension across your shoulders and in your neck ... Tense the muscles in your neck further by tipping your head back slightly ... Hold the tension ... Now relax ... Let your head drop forward ... Let your shoulders drop ... Let them drop even further ... Feel the tension easing away from your neck and shoulders ... Feel your muscles relaxing more and more deeply ... Your neck is limp and your shoulders feel heavy ... (REPEAT)

Think about your face muscles ... Focus on the muscles running across your forehead ... Tense them by frowning as hard as you can ... Hold that tension and focus on your jaw muscles ... Tense the muscles by biting hard ... Feel your jaw muscles tighten ... Feel the tension in your face ... Across your forehead ... Behind your eyes ... In your jaw ... Now let go ... Relax your forehead and drop your jaw ... Feel the strain easing ... Feel the tension draining away from your face ... Your forehead feels smooth and relaxed ... Your jaw is heavy and loose ... Imagine the tension leaving your face ... Leaving your neck ... Draining away from your shoulders ... Your head, neck, and shoulders feel heavy and relaxed. (REPEAT)

Think of your whole body now ... Your entire body feels heavy and relaxed ... Let go of any tension ... Imagine the tension flowing out of your body ... Listen to the sound of your calm, even breathing ... Your arms, legs and head feel pleasantly heavy ... Too heavy to move ... You may feel as though you are floating ... Let it happen ... It is part of being relaxed ...

When images drift into your mind, don't fight them ... Just acknowledge them and let them pass ... You are a

bystander: interested but not involved ... Enjoy the feelings of relaxation for a few more moments ... If you like, picture something that gives you pleasure and a sense of calm ...

'In a moment, I will count backwards from four to one ... When I reach one, open your eyes and lie still for a little while before you begin to move around again ... You will feel pleasantly relaxed and refreshed ... Four: beginning to feel more alert ... Three: getting ready to start moving again ... Two: aware of your surroundings ... One: eyes open, feeling relaxed and alert.'

Relaxation Exercise: Shortened progressive relaxation

When the first exercise is used successfully, you can shorten the routine by missing out the tensing stage. Alternatively, some people are able to begin relaxation training at this stage.

Instructions:

(READ ONCE) 'You are relaxing Breathe out slowly ... Now, breathe in smoothly and deeply ... Now, breathe out slowly again, imagining yourself becoming heavier and heavier, sinking into the floor (or your chair) ... Keep breathing rhythmically, and feel a sense of relief and of letting go ... Try saying "relax" to yourself as you breathe out ... Breathe like this for a few moments more ...

'Now, begin to relax the muscles of your body ... Think of your feet ... Let your feet go limp and floppy ... Feel the tension draining away from your feet ... Let your feet roll outwards and grow heavier and heavier ... Imagine that they are so heavy that they are sinking into the floor ... More and more relaxed ... Growing heavier and more relaxed ... (REPEAT)

'Now, think about your calves ... Let your feet touch the floor and let your legs go floppy and heavy ... Feel the tension leaving your legs, draining away from your calves ... Leaving your calves feeling heavy ... Draining away from your feet ... Leaving them feeling heavy and limp ... Imagine that your legs and feet are so heavy that they are sinking into the floor ... They feel limp and relaxed ... Growing more and more heavy and relaxed ... (REPEAT)

'Think about your thigh muscles ... Feel the tension draining away from your legs ... They feel limp and heavy ... Your thighs feel heavy ... Your calves feel heavy ... Your feet feel heavy ... Imagine the tension draining away ... Leaving your legs ... Leaving them feeling limp and relaxed ... Leaving them feeling so heavy that they are sinking into the floor (or your chair) ... Let the feelings of relaxation spread up from your feet ... Up through your legs ... Relaxing your hips and lower back ... (REPEAT)

'Now relax the muscles of your hips, and lower back ... If you feel tension, let it go ... Let your muscles relax ... Feel your spine supported ... Feel the muscles relax ... Deeper and deeper ... More and more relaxed ... Growing heavier and heavier ... Your hips are relaxed ... Your legs are relaxed ... Your feet are heavy ... Tension is draining away from your body... (REPEAT)

'Relax your stomach and chest muscles ... As you breathe out, let go of your tension ... Feel your stomach muscles relax ... Feel the tightness leave your chest ... As you breathe evenly and calmly, your chest and stomach should gently

rise and fall ... Allow your breathing to become rhythmic and relaxed ... (REPEAT)

Now think about your hands and arms ... Gently drop your arms by your sides and imagine the tension draining away from your arms ... Leaving your upper arms ... Leaving your forearms ... Draining away from your hands ... Your arms feel heavy and floppy ... Your arms feel limp and relaxed ... (REPEAT)

Think about the muscles in your shoulders ... Now relax ... Let your head drop forward ... Let your shoulders drop ... Let them drop even further ... Feel the tension easing away from your neck and shoulders ... Feel your muscles relaxing more and more deeply ... Your neck is limp and your shoulders feel heavy ... (REPEAT)

Think about your face muscles ... Focus on the muscles running across your forehead ... Relax your forehead and drop your jaw ... Feel the strain easing ... Feel the tension draining away from your face ... Your forehead feels smooth and relaxed ... Your jaw is heavy and loose ... Imagine the tension leaving your face ... Leaving your neck ... Draining away from your shoulders ... Your head, neck, and shoulders feel heavy and relaxed ... (REPEAT)

Think of your whole body now ... Your entire body feels heavy and relaxed ... Let go of any tension ... Imagine the tension flowing out of your body ... Listen to the sound of your calm, even breathing ... Your arms, legs and head feel pleasantly heavy ... Too heavy to move ... You may feel as though you are floating ... Let it happen ... It is part of being relaxed ... When images drift into your mind, don't fight them ... Just acknowledge them and let them pass ... You are a bystander: interested but not involved ... Enjoy the feelings of relaxation for a few more moments ... If you like, picture something that gives you pleasure and a sense of calm ...

In a moment, I will count backwards from four to one ... When I reach one, open your eyes and lie still for a little while before you begin to move around again ... You will feel pleasantly relaxed and refreshed ... Four: beginning to feel more alert ... Three: getting ready to start moving again ... Two: aware of your surroundings ... One: eyes open, feeling relaxed and alert.'

Relaxation Exercise: Simple relaxation routine

Once deep relaxation has been mastered, or for those who might not need or want to engage in the longer exercise, you can introduce an even shorter exercise, which can be practised whenever it is needed. The following routine is based on Benson's "Relaxation Routine" which incorporates a mental image or mental device into the relaxation exercise. This can be a pleasant, calming scene, such as a deserted beach, a particularly relaxing picture or object, a soothing sound or word, like the sound of the sea or the word 'serene'. The important thing is that a person finds something that is calming for them.

From time to time, distracting thoughts will come to mind – this is quite usual. Don't dwell on this; simply encourage your clients to return to thinking about the soothing image or sound. Once you have started the exercise, and got into the rhythm of it, carry on for a minute or so (it's up to you and your patient to decide how much time you need to achieve a sense of relaxation).

Instructions:

To start the exercise, sit in a comfortable position. First, focus on your breathing. Take a slow, deep breath in ...

Feel the muscle beneath your rib cage move ... Now let it out – slowly ... Aim for a smooth pattern of breathing.

‘Close your eyes, and, while you continue to breathe slowly, imagine your body becoming more heavy ... Scan your body for tension ... Start at your feet and move up through your body to your shoulders and head ... If you find any tension, try to relax that part of your body ... Now, while your body is feeling as heavy and comfortable as possible, become aware of your breathing again ... Breathe in through your nose, and fill your lungs fully ... Now, breathe out again and bring to mind your tranquil image or sound ... Breathe easily and naturally as you do this ... Again, breathe in through your nose, filling your lungs, right down to your diaphragm ... and out, thinking of your soothing picture or sound ... When you are ready to breathe in again, repeat the cycle ... Keep repeating this cycle until you feel relaxed and calm and refreshed ...

‘When you have finished this exercise, sit quietly for a few moments, and enjoy the feeling of relaxation. Don’t move around too quickly if you have been quite relaxed – take it gently.’

All these exercises are a means to an end: the end point is your client being able to recognise unproductive tension and respond by calming relaxing themselves. Everyone will fare differently and progress will have its ups and downs, so you should prepare your client for this and help them to experience set-backs as normal and as learning opportunities.

A cautionary word about safety-seeking behaviours

As you will be aware, some CBT strategies can be used as “safety-seeking behaviors” (SBs) or behaviours that give reassurance without instilling fundamental confidence (see Salkovskis, 1991). There are no absolute SBs as it is a person’s interpretation that distinguishes an SB from genuine coping. If someone uses a technique, such as relaxation, and concludes that they only managed to get through because they used the strategy, then they are using it as an SB. Relaxation is not helping them develop the confidence that *they* can cope. On the other hand, a person might use relaxation and conclude that they made a good decision, that their choice was helpful. In this instance they develop confidence that they can cope and gain a longer-term sense of mastery over their problem – thus, relaxation is being used as a coping strategy. You need to check that your patient is developing the latter attitude.

You can often encourage this by helping them to see that they have choices and are making decisions. This will engender more of a sense of autonomy and mastery. You can also encourage people to gradually reduce their use of relaxation exercises as their confidence in coping increases.

References:

- Benson, H. (1975). *The relaxation response*. New York: Morrow
- Jacobson, E. (1970). *Modern treatments of tense patients*. Springfield, IL: Thomas.
- Salkovskis, P.M. (1991) *The Importance of Behaviour in the Maintenance of Anxiety and Panic: A Cognitive Account* Behavioural Psychotherapy. 19, 6-1