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Mindfulness and Relaxation

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Besides pain and sadness, depression also generates a lot of tension and stress. Most of us get so wrapped up in these feelings of guilt and self-blame that we forget to live in the moment and experience the present just as it is.

If you want to regain control over your life, you need to start living in the “here and now”. That is why we are now going to explore two simple strategies that work miracles against the unpleasant effects of depression.

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Mindful Living

At the basis of mindfulness is living in the present, by focusing on specific actions, which you can engage in here and now.

The reason why therapists often prescribe mindfulness for depression, is that it keeps you firmly anchored in positive routines and current goals. Thus practicing mindfulness helps reduce one’s tendency to drift into past memories and negative thoughts.

Coping with Painful Regret

Being constantly preoccupied with what you have or haven’t done in your life is a clear road to

disaster. In fact, from a purely rational point of view, regret is completely useless. The only consequence of regret is that it keeps you in a spiral of shame and self-criticism.

In order to cope with those negative thoughts and painful memories, use the ABC model ^[1], which you have already learned about.

Mindfulness Made Simple

However, you probably know that replacing negativity and regret, with more positive and rational thoughts, is not enough on its own.

You need something to keep you firmly rooted in the present moment and that's where mindfulness comes into play. One of the most positive attributions of mindfulness, is that it is straightforward and simple to implement - anyone can learn and apply its basic principles.

Target a Specific Action

In order to practice mindfulness, you need to find specific actions that will keep you firmly anchored to the present moment.

Choose simple tasks, which do not require a lot of effort, but are enjoyable. It is important to engage in these tasks on your own, so that you won't be distracted from the practice of mindfulness.

Some examples are taking a walk or simply sitting in the park, petting or feeding an animal, engaging in a simple craft, having a home-brewed cup of tea, etc.

Live in the Moment

The key to effective mindfulness is to focus your attention on the chosen task. This will prevent your mind from drifting into past memories and intrusive thoughts. Enjoy the task, by taking the time to notice and experience its details.

Even if you are enjoying the task tremendously, at least at first, it may be difficult to prevent intrusive thoughts from bothering you. The last thing you want to do is try to block out the thoughts.

Let Your Thoughts Be

You have probably heard of the example, where someone asks you not to think of a pink elephant. Now all you can think about is that pink elephant. The same happens when you try to prevent yourself from having negative thoughts.

A much more effective strategy is to let your thoughts pass through your mind, without fighting or judging them. Let them be – allow them to come in, linger for a bit, and then pass through.

At first, this idea may seem bizarre, but with practice it will become increasingly simple for you to do.

Use Your Senses

Focusing your attention on the task at hand is not always enough to keep you firmly rooted in the present moment. Sometimes, a little help from our basic senses (sight, smell, touch, hearing and taste) is just what we need to better anchor ourselves in the here and now.

Let's say that the task you've chosen is to feed grain to the birds at your local park:

Look around

Observe the environment, nature, the people walking by. Notice the grain in your hands and how identical to the rest, yet different each seed looks. Study the birds around you – how they move, what their feathers look like, how they interact, etc.

Smell

Find the scents around you and examine them. Does the park have a general smell? Can you catch various whiffs, coming from different sources?

Touch

Run your hand through the surface of the bench or the ground that you are sitting on. Is it rough, smooth, cold, hot? How does it feel against the skin of your fingertips? Rub the grain between your fingers.

Hear what is happening: Can you hear children's laughter or the distant conversation of passers-by? What do the leaves of the trees sound like? Try to differentiate between the calls of different bird species.

Taste

You can use your sense of taste, even when you are not eating or drinking. Contemplate the taste in your mouth and consider if different areas of your tongue might feel differently.

Deep Breath – Hold – Exhale

This simple breathing exercise helps you relax and avoid depressive rumination, or repetitively engaging in overpowering, negative thought. Not only does it calm your mind, but it also relaxes the muscles.

Here's how you can do it:

1. Slowly inhale through your nose to a mental count of five.
- 2.

Hold your breath for a few seconds to a count to five.

3. Slowly exhale through your mouth to a mental count of five.
4. Repeat as many times as you'd like, but try to do it for at least half a minute.

Benefit from the Settings

You can enhance the positive effect of the exercise by finding a comfortable position, as well as a cozy surface. Furthermore, it would be best to practice this breathing exercise in relaxing, pleasant settings.

Still, one of the best things about breathing exercises is that you can engage in them almost anywhere. At home, at work, on the street, during your lunch break - anywhere you'd like.

Sleep Better

Last but not least, you can use this breathing exercise to improve your sleep. Many people who struggle with depression find it difficult to fall asleep at night. Just repeat the first 3 steps over and over again, until you start to doze off.

Since mindfulness and breathing exercise are so relaxing, it is important to remember that you shouldn't engage in them, while doing tasks that require your full attention, such as driving, operating heavy machinery, etc.

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Links

[1] <https://explorable.com/e/abc-model>