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Relaxation Exercise - Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)

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Dealing with anxiety related to public speaking requires focusing on various aspects of our psyche - thoughts, emotions, and consequently - behavior. As you already know, anxiety strikes our bodies, as well as our thoughts and feelings. Luckily, you can apply an excellent relaxation technique, to minimize the effect that anxiety has on your body.

Just like it is for most other creatures on this planet, breathing is a crucial part of our survival. We take in oxygen from the air, which our bodies then assimilate, and expel the waste product carbon dioxide (CO₂). When our heart rate is regular, and we are not under distress, the levels of oxygen and carbon dioxide in our bodies remain in a healthy balance, and so we can function on an optimal level.

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Breathing and Anxiety

However, anxiety alters our breathing and causes numerous physiological symptoms, which you have probably already experienced. When highly anxious, our respiratory rate and heartbeat increase. Naturally, this leads to an increased oxygen intake, as well as prematurely breathe out more CO₂ than you should be.

The process, therefore, leads to an imbalance in the organism. This would be normal and helpful if you were in a situation where you had to escape a danger that was putting your life

in jeopardy. However, when you are not physically active, your body doesn't use this extra oxygen we breathe in and doesn't produce any additional CO₂ either. We breathe out carbon dioxide faster than the body can produce it, which leads to blood dilution. These physical changes, cause experiences, such as sweatiness, lightheadedness and tingling in the limbs. When we regain our regular breathing pattern, the levels of carbon dioxide return to normal and the symptoms of anxiety tend to wear off.

What you can derive from this information, is that your breathing is affected by anxiety, but it can also have an impact on it. Therefore, you can use your breathing to cope with anxiety.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)

Our bodies are naturally equipped to deal with stressful situations, such as being attacked by a bear. But, when there's no bear in sight, and our lives are not objectively endangered, we can learn how to relax the mind, and thus to relax our bodies as well.

What Is the Point?

Progressive muscle relaxation allows you to experience the sensation of every muscle group in your body being tensed, followed by the polar feeling of complete relaxation. The idea behind this exercise is to notice the contrast between tension and relaxation so that you can identify when your muscles are tense and deliberately let go of the unnecessary tension.

Can Anyone Do It?

Before starting this exercise, you should have in mind that some of its components can be difficult, especially if you suffer from any physical injuries. Even if that is the case, don't skip the entire exercise, but instead avoid those muscle groups, where the trauma is located. If you are unsure of its safety in your personal circumstances, it is always a good idea to consult with your physician, before engaging in progressive muscle relaxation.

The Procedure

Preparation

Sit in a comfortable chair, and make sure your head is supported. Alternatively, you can lie down on the floor or bed. Make sure that you are someplace where you won't be interrupted or distracted – turn off all gadgets, and ask others in the house not to seek you out during this time. It would also be helpful to take a certain time out of your schedule, for instance, 15 minutes, if you are extremely busy and tend to get restless.

Close your eyes and direct your attention to different parts of your body, one at a time. Start at the bottom of your body – with your toes and feet, and gradually move up to the top of your head. Your next step is to go through each of following sequences three times.

Sequence 1

Tense the muscles in your toes, with vigor, for a few seconds and hold, to a count of 5-10. After that, relax them entirely, for the same period.

Sequence 2

This time, tense up the muscles in your toes again, but only mildly - just enough to feel enough to notice a slight tension; hold and then relax.

Sequence 3

Focus your attention on the muscles in your toes, but do nothing with them. After bringing this muscle group into full focus, resolve to relax them and follow through. This sequence doesn't require that you tense your muscles at all - just observe and relax them.

The Benefits

You can repeat this quick, yet effective exercise with each muscle group in your body - remember to progress gradually, moving up toward the top of your head, one muscle group at a time.

As you may notice, this exercise is somewhat similar to mindfulness. Both require focusing on the present moment.

You can use them together, whenever and wherever you need to. It is especially helpful to consider that you can apply those exercises anywhere – from the comfort of your bed to a public restroom or a park bench, including minutes before speaking in front of an audience.

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