Relaxation Training

DP 031 - Developmental

By

Michael R. Slavit

The Clearinghouse for Structured/Thematic Groups & Innovative Programs
Counseling & Mental Health Center
The University of Texas at Austin
100A W. Dean Keeton St. (W. 26th St.)
Austin, Texas 78712 • 512-471-3515 • Fax 512-471-8875
http://www.utexas.edu/student/cmhc
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The program covers major concepts of relaxation, presents progressive relaxation exercises and imagery training, and concludes with suggestions for practice and the message that participants should not equate lack of relaxation with lack of personal worth. Methods of presenting these exercises are the result of the author's eight-year use of the techniques.

GOALS: To teach the nature of stress, tension, anxiety, and relaxation and their effect on our lives; to provide a brief but effective and convincing training session in relaxation; to introduce methods for using relaxation effectively

TARGET: As an education program, this one-session relaxation training has been conducted in a large lecture hall with as many as 100 students. As a developmental program, it can be used to help persons with recognized but not incapacitating anxiety and tension.

STAFF: One or two counselors with some experience in relaxation training

LENGTH: Single session of 1 - 2 hours

SIZE: 20 or fewer (See remarks under "Target.")

OTHER: For more problematic anxiety, see Improving Relaxation and Control of Anxiety, also available through the Clearinghouse.

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RELAXATION TRAINING

Michael R. Slavit, Ph.D.
The Counseling-Psychological Services Center
The University of Texas at Austin
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INTRODUCTION

The outreach program described herein is one of a series prepared by the staff of the Counseling-Psychological Services Center, The University of Texas at Austin. The series includes the more frequently requested outreach topics and is designed to assist CPSC staff members responding to such requests. All programs in the series follow the format outlined below:

I. Goals/Objectives
II. Target Population(s)
III. Overview/Summarization
IV. Outline
V. Description of Content
VI. Special Instructions/Recommendations

These materials are intended for use in single-session (1-2 hours) outreach presentations or workshops. At the presenter's discretion, materials may be used in part or as a whole.
RELAXATION TRAINING

I. Goals/Objectives

A. General

1. To educate participants about the nature of stress, tension, anxiety, and relaxation, and the effects of these variables on our lives; and

2. To provide a brief, but effective and convincing, training session to teach participants to feel relaxed, and to introduce them to methods for utilizing relaxation effectively in their lives.

B. Specific

1. To define stress as environmental changes to which our nervous systems are designed to react (Selye);

2. To define anxiety as a "feeling that things aren't right" — an uncomfortable, fear-like feeling without a clear threat;

3. To define tension as the physical counterpart of anxiety, entailing such physiological manifestations as increased heart rate, increased blood pressure, quickened respiration, shortening of muscle fibers, increased electrical activity in the nervous tissue serving the muscles, and increased secretion of certain substances into the bloodstream;

4. To advance the concept that relaxation and tension are incompatible states of being, and that to learn to relax is to learn to be not anxious and not tense;

5. To advance the concept that relaxation is not an inherited trait, but a skill that can be learned;

6. To advance the concept that once we teach our bodies to be relaxed in a controlled setting, we can begin to learn to increase our comfort in "real life" settings by conscientiously applying our learned skills;

7. To provide a progressive relaxation exercise that will afford maximum opportunity for all participants to feel deep relaxation;

8. To introduce diaphragmatic breathing and imagery as natural methods to deepen relaxation;

9. To prescribe and fully describe a regimen by which participants can train themselves, within two to three weeks, to achieve deep relaxation quickly by using diaphragmatic breathing and imagery;
Goals/Objectives (continued)

10. To emphasize the point that knowledge of the techniques without practice avails little, but that with practice most individuals are capable of dramatically increasing their health and comfort; and

11. To recommend that participants be patient and gentle with themselves; and that they remind themselves that changes such as those recommended by the trainer(s) may be in their interest, but are not necessities for personal worth.

II. Target Population

This program is appropriate for all populations found in the university community.

III. Overview

This program includes an educational component and an experiential component. The educational component concerns raising consciousness about stress and anxiety, and about the development of the technique of progressive relaxation training. The experiential component involves the presentation of a progressive relaxation exercise, using both the "tension-release" method and the "focusing" method. Prescriptions for practice and refinement of the relaxation skills is an integral part of the workshop, as is the clear message to participants that use of the skills will probably be in their interest, but is not necessary for personal worth.

IV. Outline

A. Introduction

1. Welcome the participants.

2. Give brief overview of workshop.

3. Ask for some sharing from participants of their previous experience with relaxation or related techniques, and of their hopes and expectations for the presentation. Use this as an opportunity to deliver a few lecturettes, advancing the concepts listed on page 1 as specific objectives, "1" through "6".

4. Trace the development in the western world of relaxation training, beginning with Edmund Jacobson's work.

B. Relaxation Training

1. Explain the relaxation training procedure.

2. Give everyone the opportunity, without focusing on any particular individual, to check their breathing to be sure that their breath is going deep into their lungs, causing their diaphragms to descend and their abdomens to rise.
Outline (continued)

3. Present the progressive relaxation exercise. In using the "tension-release" exercises, ask that participants tense muscle groups only once. A few muscle groups, such as arms, jaw, and abdomen, may be tensed twice. Use the "focusing" method described in Section V below to enhance the relaxation begun with the tension-release exercises.

4. Check with as many participants as possible to determine how well they were able to relax. Do some "trouble-shooting" with any participants who may not have experienced a pleasurable relaxation.

C. Imagery Training

1. Introduce the concept that imagery, an internal technique, can be a natural and effective way of inducing relaxation.

2. Introduce the exercise on creating a relaxation scene.

3. Lead the exercise on creating a relaxation scene.

D. Prescription for Practice

E. Conclusion

1. Review of concepts

2. Encourage practice

3. Conclude with restatement of message that attainment of better anxiety management skills would probably be in the participants' best interest, but that improvement is not a prerequisite for personal worth.

V. Description of Content

A. Introduction

The introductory stage of the workshop is designed to set the tone for the workshop, to find out about the participants' previous experiences with relaxation training and their expectations for the workshop, and to provide an educational overview.

In western psychology, relaxation training traces its beginnings to the work of Edmund Jacobson, a physiologist who worked at Harvard, Cornell, Bell Laboratories, and the University of Chicago. He found that when persons report a subjective feeling of anxiety, this feeling is accompanied by a number of physiological changes. The particular physiological phenomenon on which Jacobson focused his attention is a tendency of muscle fibers in the peripheral musculature to become shorter under the condition of anxiety and to lengthen as a function of
Description of Content (continued)

relaxation. Jacobson found that if a person first tenses and then releases the muscles in various muscle groups in the body, muscle fibers actually lengthen, accompanied by other physiological changes, and the person typically reports an increase in subjective comfort and relaxation.

Jacobson's procedure was very lengthy, covering fifty-six sessions. The length of training has since been shortened considerably in more recent techniques, although the approximately fifteen muscle groups used by Jacobson are still typically used.

See specific objectives "1" through "6" on page 1 for a summary of the other concepts to be introduced during this initial stage of the presentation.

B. Relaxation Training

Leader Instructions:*

"And now, I'll lead you through the exercises which I've been describing. Is anyone wearing contact lenses? (yes) Can you close your eyes with them in? Good. We'll be closing our eyes during a portion of this exercise, and I want to ensure that we can be comfortable. Arrange yourselves as comfortably as you can in a chair...ensuring that your head, back, and neck are in as comfortably aligned a position as possible. Good. If any of your clothing, such as belts or neckties, are tight or constricting, you may wish to loosen them in order to ensure comfort. You'll probably be most comfortable if you'll sit with your feet flat on the floor.

"And now I'd like you to put one hand on your abdomen, and take a few deep breaths. Notice whether your hand rises or falls as you inhale. What I'd like you to do is to breathe deeply into your lungs so that your hand rises as you inhale. Sometimes people may have a tendency to suck in their stomach and expand their chest (demonstrate). For this exercise, I'd like you to breathe deeply into your lungs. This will cause your diaphragm to descend, and your stomach to expand. Good. You can put your hand back in a comfortable position.

"I'm going to be asking you to take some slow, deep breaths. When I do, I'll be saying the words, 'Take a slow...deep breath...and exhale and relax.' Since I'm talking to a group of you, my instructions will not be perfectly timed for each of you. So don't try to pace your breaths exactly with my words. And now, let's begin by taking a slow, deep breath...and exhale and relax. Again, a slow, deep breath...and exhale and relax. Give yourself permission to relax. You have no obligations or appointments now other than to appreciate and enjoy relaxation.

*The instructions for progressive relaxation will be entered here in transcript form, in quotes. However, these instructions may be altered in order to fit the style of the presenter and the needs of the situation.
"We're going to focus on several parts of our bodies now, one at a time, and to first introduce some tension and then to release it. In so doing, we'll really learn to distinguish between the feelings of tension and of relaxation. As we proceed, you'll be learning how much tension you have to introduce in order for you to appreciate fully the difference between these feelings. Don't introduce any more tension than you have to.

"Also, when I say the word, 'relax,' I don't want you to let go of the tension slowly, but rather to let the tension go all at once (demonstrate with hand). The reason for this is that when we tense our muscles, the muscle fibers actually become shorter, and when we release the tension, the muscle fibers lengthen out. Letting the tension go all at once gives more momentum to the lengthening of the fibers. (This can be further explained by drawing an analogy to letting a pendulum swing.)

"And now, we'll start with the right hand. Make your right hand into a fist. Pay close attention to the feelings of tightness and tension...take a deep breath and hold it...and...exhale and relax...relax your hand all at once, and feel the difference between the tightness and the relaxation. There may be a feeling of warmth in your right hand...if so, allow that feeling to help you to experience the difference between tension and relaxation. Stretch your fingers out wide...and let them fall into a natural, relaxed position. Good.

(It may be helpful for the trainer to do these exercises while giving the instructions. This may serve two purposes: 1) it gives the participants a feeling that the presenter is a participant rather than an aloof observer; and 2) it may help the presenter remain particularly relaxed, which may help the presenter to speak in comfortable, relaxing tones of voice.)

"And now...make your right hand into a fist, and straighten out your right arm, bringing the tension all the way up to your shoulder. Take a deep breath and hold it...and exhale and relax. Stretch your fingers out wide...and let them fall into a comfortable, relaxed position. Notice the difference between the feelings of tension and of relaxation. The more aware we are of the difference between these feelings, the more relaxed we can become.

"Once again, now, make your right hand into a fist, and straighten out your right arm, bringing the tension all the way up to your shoulder. Take a deep breath and hold it...and exhale and relax. Stretch your fingers and relax them. Again, pay attention to the difference between tightness and relaxation, knowing that the more aware you are of that difference, the more fully you can appreciate and enjoy the feeling of relaxation.
"In a moment, we'll begin working on the left side. As we do, be aware of how much tension you have to introduce in order for you to distinguish fully between tightness and relaxation. Don't introduce any more tension than you can comfortably relax."

At this point, the progressive relaxation exercises proceed in much the same way. Having now worked with the right hand (once) and the right hand-and-arm (twice), the following muscle groups may be used:

Left hand (once)
Left hand-and-arm (twice)
Shoulders (once)
Neck

(Great care would best be taken in working with the muscles of the neck, especially in group work. Neck and back ailments are common, and it is possible to impair rather than to enhance relaxation if discomfort is introduced. One procedure is to ask all participants who have experienced neck injury or problems to abstain from this exercise and just to focus on relaxing the neck muscles without introducing any tension first. One exercise which may be helpful is neck circles, being very sure to instruct participants to "introduce no muscular tension to this area, but merely use the weight of your head to gently smooth and relax the muscles in your neck." Also, if neck circles are used, it may be advisable to ask participants to move their head and neck "as slowly as humanly possible." Neck circles are not universally acceptable as advisable practice. Use your own judgment.)

Forehead (once knitting eyebrows & once raising eyebrows)
Eyes (gently, once)
Tongue against palate (once)
Jaw (perhaps twice)
Right leg (once)
Left leg (once)
Abdomen (twice)

Having run through one or two "tension-release" cycles in these thirteen areas, it will be helpful to ask the participants to focus on each of these areas to enhance relaxation. Instructions for this exercise may be given as follows:

"And now focus your attention on your forehead, and imagine that the muscles in your forehead are all smoothing out and relaxing. Allow total relaxation in your forehead."

All of the muscle groups which were previously tensed and released may be focused on in this way, enhancing relaxation. Specific instructions will vary somewhat among muscle groups. When asking participants to imagine a muscle group relaxing, use the words smoothing out, and avoid words such as
"loosening" or "softening." In short, try to avoid any images which may be distasteful to some participants. Keep this phase of the exercise simple.

After completing the tension-release exercises and the focusing exercise, the relaxation exercise may be ended quite simply. Use your own judgment as to whether you wish to utilize the participants' relaxed state to talk to them about the exercises to follow. A very simple way to end the exercise would be as follows:

"And now, having relaxed fully and deeply, you can be more confident of your ability to relax and manage anxiety effectively. When you are ready, begin to stretch out your muscles a little bit and...whenever you're ready to...open your eyes."

C. Imagery Training

The purpose of this phase of the workshop is to help each participant create a relaxation scene that will be immediately helpful in deepening relaxation, and that may be eventually used by the participants to replace the longer progressive relaxation procedure. Explain to the participants the purpose of the imagery training, and then ask them to begin thinking about a scene which for them would be particularly comfortable, serene, and relaxing. Some of the instructions may be given as follows:

"As you think about a scene that would bring you comfort and relaxation, give yourself freedom of choice. You may choose a scene for its calmness and serenity. Or, you may choose to see yourself in an active scene that you would find relaxing. You may imagine a place you have been many times...for instance, you may wish to imagine your favorite beach, your favorite mountain trail, or your favorite sofa in front of your favorite fireplace. Or, you may wish to imagine a scene that you have experienced once or twice. For instance, you have a memory of feeling particularly calm, happy, and relaxed in a place where you were on vacation at some time in the past. You may wish to imagine a scene that you have never seen, but you imagine does exist...for instance, you may want to imagine yourself stretched out on a hammock hanging between two palm trees on a tiny desert island. Or, you may wish to imagine yourself in a scene that you know could not possibly exist, but one that you would find particularly relaxing if it were to exist...for instance, you may imagine yourself floating on a cloud. When you have decided on a scene, signal me by nodding...Good.

"Now, close your eyes and make a picture of your scene...and when you have that picture in mind, just nod...Good. Now, put yourself in your scene."
Description of Content (continued)

At this point, give enough suggestions to ensure that each participant will have the opportunity to create imagery of the scene in as many sensory modalities as possible, particularly visual, auditory, and tactile/kinesthetic imagery.

D. Prescription for Practice

Emphasize the point that the participants have now been introduced to the skills which will enable them to keep themselves relaxed and to manage anxiety effectively, but that the skills will avail little unless they train themselves in a very systematic way. Suggest that each participant make a list of the thirteen muscle groups used in the progressive relaxation exercise. Suggest a three-week regimen of practice. The first three weeks would include practicing the progressive muscle relaxation exercises twice daily, and monitoring tension to see where in the individual's body tension can first be discerned. Then, the participant may arrange a list of muscle groups so that the top muscle group listed is the most difficult group to relax fully, and the bottom group listed is the easiest muscle group to relax. Suggest that over a two-week period, the participants continue to practice the progressive muscle relaxation exercises, ending the exercises with their relaxation scenes, but that each day they delete the tension-release exercise with the bottom muscle group on the list. By the end of two weeks, participants may be able to relax fully by using diaphragmatic breathing and the relaxation exercise.

VI. Special Instructions/Recommendations

A. Some planning may need to be done in order to ensure a comfortable room, and a period of time free from interruptions. A carpeted floor with pillows is not a necessity. Participants can relax quite effectively sitting in chairs.

B. The most likely problem which could be encountered is that occasionally an individual who is extremely tension-ridden, and who is a "self-observer" and a "self-criticizer," may not relax, and may even become more tense as a result of not relaxing while seeing others relax. Since screening is an unlikely part of most outreach programs, it is important to be prepared to intervene as soon as possible with such an individual, and to reassure that person that his or her reaction, though not typical, is still not so unusual as to warrant worry and overconcern. A suggestion to such a participant that individualized relaxation training may be useful may be appropriate.

C. Participants may ask questions as to the relationship between progressive relaxation and such systems as transcendental meditation, yoga, T'ai Chi, natural childbirth methods, etc. It is advantageous to have thought through such issues, and to emphasize the role of progressive relaxation as a practical, effective, scientific technique which may be similar to and supportive of some of those other systems, but which is not a religious, quasi-religious, or countercultural system.