

THE PROBLEM: "SOMATIC"

ANXIETY SYMPTOMS

Most people that experience anxiety also experience unpleasant physical sensations regularly. In medical lingo, the fancy term for "physical" is somatic. We all know some of the most common somatic symptoms of anxiety: muscle tension, headaches, backaches, a clenched jaw, feeling keyed up, restless, and "on edge," as well as difficulty concentrating. You may remember that these symptoms are a side effect of our body's attempts to protect us; blood moves around our body and brain, into our large muscles, like our arms, legs, back, and neck, to get us ready to "fight" or to "flee." This changes the feelings in our bodies. In short the body is working hard to protect us, and these feelings are uncomfortable! Relaxation happens when the body stops trying to protect us, which helps us feel more calm and at ease.

RELAXATION STRATEGIES: WHEN? HOW? WHY?

Relaxation strategies are best used as a companion to exposure and cognitive skills, but not as a replacement to them. Sometimes relaxation strategies can actually make anxiety worse in the long run. Why? Because sometimes relaxation strategies are used as a way to get rid of anxiety when we are in distress; trying to get rid of something trains our brains to see it as "bad." So we teach the brain to set off the anxiety "alarm" even louder when the anxiety presents itself. In the long run, this makes the anxiety worse. In short, there are times and places for relaxation skills!



RELAXATION STRATEGIES ***WHEN? HOW? WHY?***

Relaxation strategies are just one set of skills used in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT).

We all would like to spend more time feeling relaxed, but relaxation skills are not always the right skills to improve our anxiety in the long run. One important CBT skill is knowing when to use certain techniques, so we want to know when relaxation strategies are or are not helpful for us.

WHEN TO USE RELAXATION STRATEGIES

- 1. As a daily practice, like exercise, to lower tension and feel calmer in our bodies over time.**
- 2. During times of distress to prevent avoidance of something that is integral to our life aims.**

Why? It helps to reinforce the thought: "Doing this exercise will not cure my anxiety, but it will keep me from avoiding the situation."

When we face the anxiety, the brain learns that it is not so dangerous, which, in turn, lowers the anxiety in the long run.

WHEN NOT TO USE RELAXATION STRATEGIES

1. In times of panic or severe distress as a way to get rid of the anxiety.

2. As a replacement for other types of CBT skills such as cognitive restructuring and exposure.

Why? It can be an overreaction thinking: "This anxiety is unbearable! I must do something to make it feel better!"

This reinforces the idea that anxiety is dangerous, which causes more anxiety over time.

A night scene with a path, trees, and a large crescent moon in a starry sky. The path is illuminated by small lights, and the trees are silhouetted against the dark sky. The moon is a large, glowing crescent shape in the upper center of the image.

TAKE HOME POINTS:

Relaxation strategies can be useful in reducing general levels of anxiety and tension over time. They are not typically a "cure" for anxiety, they are best used together with other CBT skills such as cognitive restructuring and exposure and practiced regularly, like exercise. They also should not be used to prevent or get rid of panic or severe anxiety symptoms.