



# **STRESS LESS:**

## **Relaxation Enhancement Group Therapist Manual**

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# BACKGROUND AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE RELAXATION ENHANCEMENT (RE) MANUAL

Research demonstrates that relaxation techniques are efficacious for short-term reduction of anxiety and fear in people with anxiety disorders and trauma- and stressor-related disorders.<sup>1</sup> These techniques are often included in treatment protocols for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and used as coping skills to temporarily address trauma-related anxiety and stress.<sup>2,3</sup> To date, little research has been conducted on the effectiveness of relaxation techniques beyond the therapeutic environment.<sup>4</sup>

Several variables that may explain why Veterans may not practice relaxation strategies once they leave the group session include 1) limited understanding of the role relaxation techniques play in helping them achieve treatment goals, 2) unavailability of equipment to practice relaxation outside the group session, 3) lack of a specific plan regarding how and when to apply these strategies, 4) lack of positive feedback when strategies are appropriately applied and little opportunity to problem solve when difficulties arise, and 5) lack of motivation.

To target these potential treatment barriers, we developed and implemented a comprehensive *Relaxation Enhancement (RE)* protocol. Our goal is to improve Veteran adherence to the practice of relaxation to reduce short-term anxiety and stress. The RE protocol includes: 1) a standard rationale for using relaxation techniques that is discussed in group, with a copy provided to Veterans for reference, based on various writings of experts in the field of anxiety and PTSD<sup>2,3,4,5</sup>; 2) relaxation practices<sup>2,5,6</sup> taught in session and conducted by the group leader to increase Veteran buy-in; 3) a list of resources that include audio downloads of these practices provided to Veterans for use outside of the sessions; 4) strategies for using the resources outlined with each Veteran, including time of day, number of practices per week, and potential barriers to practicing the techniques outside of group treatment; 5) in-group discussion of barriers encountered by Veterans; and 6) a Relaxation Log (RL)/wallet card to reinforce improvement in anxiety by the Veteran and to track use of strategies for the group leader.

Please note that this is a brief intervention, meant to provide short-term symptom relief for anxiety and stress. We recommend that the RE protocol be used as an adjunct to established first-line treatment approaches.<sup>7</sup>



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# GROUP STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

The RE group consists of four weekly, 50-minute sessions. The first 25 minutes of each session are psychoeducational. This format allows you to enhance salience and motivation. Group content is based on a compilation of techniques, drawn from the writings of experts working in the field.<sup>1-9</sup>

Sections of the Stress Less Veteran Manual are purposely left blank. Encourage the Veterans to use this space to take notes on the didactic information being presented.

The second portion of the RE group is devoted to learning and practicing relaxation techniques, each proven efficacious in the short-term reduction of anxiety and management of other PTSD-related symptoms. Inclusion of 4 different techniques maximizes exposure to a variety of relaxation methods. These techniques include: calm breathing<sup>2</sup> (session 1); progressive muscle relaxation<sup>10</sup> (PMR; session 2); guided imagery<sup>5</sup> (session 3); and grounding (session 4).

Assignment of the RL is an important component of the RE protocol. The rationale and importance of the RL are explained during the first session and reinforced during each remaining session. Inform Veterans that the group will discuss log entries during each remaining group session. We used a wallet-sized RL to increase the likelihood that Veterans will use the logs and bring them to group each week. The content and format of the card are below. In session, Veterans should mark the relaxation technique practiced in a session with an “X.” The therapist then instructs the Veterans to mark the additional relaxation technique(s) practiced outside of the group session with an “X” to track their adherence to the protocol.

| RELAXATION LOG  |   |   |   |    |   |   |    |
|-----------------|---|---|---|----|---|---|----|
|                 | M | T | W | Th | F | S | Su |
| Deep Breath     |   |   |   |    |   |   |    |
| PMR             |   |   |   |    |   |   |    |
| Self-Hypnosis   |   |   |   |    |   |   |    |
| Mental Pictures |   |   |   |    |   |   |    |



# BEFORE BEGINNING

The purpose of the RE group is to help reduce anxiety in the short term. The strategies taught during the sessions will teach Veterans coping skills; however, these skills have not been developed to treat the conditions. Evidence-based psychotherapies (EBPs) for PTSD and other anxiety disorders, if appropriate, should be recommended for the treatment of the underlying illness(es).

## **EBPs for PTSD required to be offered by VA:**

- Cognitive Processing Therapy – Gold-Standard Treatment
- Prolonged Exposure Therapy – Gold-Standard Treatment

## **Other EBPs (as per VA and APA, Division 12)**

|                        |   |
|------------------------|---|
| <b>PTSD</b>            | Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing; Cognitive Behavioral Treatment (CBT)             |
| <b>GAD</b>             | CBT; Exposure Therapy; Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT); Dialectical Behavior Therapy |
| <b>Panic Disorder</b>  | CBT; MBCT   |
| <b>OCD</b>             | Exposure and Response Prevention; CBT   |
| <b>Social Phobia</b>   | Exposure Therapies; Exposure-Based CBT  |
| <b>Specific Phobia</b> | Exposure Therapies, Exposure-Based CBT  |

**Measurement-based care** is an important tool to understand Veterans' anxiety and track improvement. The following list of measures are free to the public to use to assess Veterans: PTSD Life Events Checklist for *DSM-5*; The PTSD Checklist for the *DSM-5*

|                        |  |
|------------------------|--|
| <b>GAD</b>             | Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale; Hamilton Anxiety Rating Scale; Severity Measure for Generalized Anxiety Disorder |
| <b>Panic Disorder</b>  | Panic and Agoraphobia Scale; Severity Measure for Panic Disorder   |
| <b>OCD</b>             | Obsessive Compulsive Inventory – Revised; Repetitive Thoughts and Behaviors; Florida Obsessive Compulsive Inventory  |
| <b>Social Phobia</b>   | Severity Measure for Social Anxiety Disorder; Social Phobia Inventory  |
| <b>Specific Phobia</b> | Severity Measure for Specific Phobia   |

**Other measures will soon be available on the APA, Division 12's website:**

<https://www.div12.org/assessment-repository/>

# SESSION 1: OUTLINE

## I. DIDACTIC:

- A. Introduce yourself and members of the group, and review the group rules and expectations.
- B. Discuss the definition of stress.
- C. Discuss how managing stress is especially important for Veterans who are diagnosed with anxiety- or trauma-related disorders (e.g., PTSD).
  - a. Emphasize the role of stress (P T **Stress** D).
  - b. Use the analogy of the body as an engine.
  - c. Discuss short- and long-term consequences of unchecked anxiety.
- D. Present an overview of how this group will address managing stress.
  - a. Increasing understanding.
  - b. Using the Subjective Units of Distress Scale (SUDS) to increase awareness.
  - c. Learning relaxation techniques.
- E. Discuss the format of the group, including the importance of between-session practices. The RL is used to record these practices. The RL is not included in the Veteran Manual.

## II. PRACTICAL APPLICATION:

- A. Have Veterans share a SUDS level verbally.
- B. Teach calm breathing; have Veterans choose a soothing word and write it in their Veteran Manual.
- C. Have Veterans complete an RL by putting a mark in the calm breathing box for that day.

## III. ASSIGNMENT #1:

- A. Practice calm breathing.
- B. Complete the RL for this week.
- C. Complete a SUDS for this week.

# SESSION 1

## Group Purpose

Increase Veteran understanding of anxiety, and introduce anxiety reduction through lecture and practice application of relaxation techniques.

## Group Rules

1. “Agree to **respect the confidentiality** of the group. **‘What happens in group stays in group.’** This will help you feel safe to discuss personal issues if you desire to do so.
2. **“Be respectful of one another.** You must feel physically and emotionally safe in group if progress is to be made. You are expected to behave in ways that will not be threatening, intimidating or provoking to others in group. Please consider ‘giving others the benefit of the doubt.’
3. **“Stay on topic,** and refrain from discussing military trauma or compensation issues, as this will take the focus away from the major reason you came to group.
4. “To maximize what you get out of the group, **attend all sessions.** Call in advance if for any reason you cannot attend.
5. **“Silence your cell phones** before each group session.”

## Defining stress

Stress = tension, hassle, worry, strain, nervousness, **ANXIETY**

### **Anxiety affects 3 areas:**

- I. **Physiological**—heart palpitations, rapid breathing, muscle tension, sweating, trembling
- II. **Psychological**—apprehension or uneasiness
- III. **Behavioral**—inability to act, express yourself or cope with daily situations

“This stress-management group will focus primarily on reducing the physiological manifestations of anxiety, particularly short-term anxiety. However, we will discuss psychological and behavioral areas, and address these later in other sessions. The good news is that decreasing the physiological aspects of anxiety will help to reduce the psychological and behavioral aspects.”

## Managing Stress

“What does PTSD stand for? Posttraumatic **STRESS** disorder—

“PTSD is a trauma- and stressor-related disorder, meaning that stress/anxiety is a component of it. While anxiety is an inevitable part of life, there is a difference between worry and nervousness and excessive anxiety that is maladaptive. Most times it is appropriate and reasonable to experience some anxiety. If you didn’t, something would be wrong. Anxiety propels us to action.

“Trauma- and stressor-related and anxiety disorders (e.g., phobias, obsessive-compulsive, or panic disorder) are different than normal stress and anxiety in that: 1) the anxiety is more intense; 2) it persists for longer periods or is more frequent; and 3) it causes impairment or disruption in the one’s life. This type of anxiety may lead to avoidance, which thereby constricts activity.”

**Anxiety reduction is not avoidance.**



## Your body is your engine.

“Imagine your body as an engine that idles high.”

**When an engine idles high, what happens to it?** (*Encourage Veterans to answer*) -

“It burns out faster; there are more problems.”

**So, if your body is an engine, what will happen to it?** (*Veterans answer*) -

“It also will have more wear and tear/problems.”

**What if you were able to turn off or lower the idle of that engine for 20-30 minutes a day? What would happen over the course of the life of that engine?** (*Veterans answer*) -

“The life of the engine would be extended. If you can reduce the wear and tear on your body, it will perform better and may last longer. If you don't try to control your stress reactions, what might happen?...”

## The short and long of it.

“There are many short- and long-term consequences of unchecked anxiety:”

| Consequences | Short Term  | Long Term   |
|--------------|---|---|
| Physical     | Headaches, muscle tension, nervousness, sweaty palms, trembling, shortness of breath, stomach pain, gastrointestinal distress | Heart problems, hypertension, high blood pressure, ulcers |
| Emotional    | Apprehension, fear  | Isolation from others, loneliness, depression             |
| Behavioral   | Avoidance of situations that increase anxiety   | Restricted activity, limited enjoyment                    |

“While there is some stress in your life that you cannot control, you can learn to reduce the stress response related to PTSD.”

## How this group will help me.

“This group will teach you about all aspects of stress and anxiety. Equally as important, it will teach you to reduce your body-engine’s idle through inducing relaxation. Relaxation is the key to reducing your body’s stress level and making it perform better and maybe even last longer.

“You will learn different relaxation techniques that you can use to combat stress: PMR, self-guided imagery, and grounding. In addition, you will master a technique called calm breathing. This technique will be the center of the other techniques and can also be used on its own to reduce acute, in-the-moment, anxiety.”

**SUDS** - A new way to communicate about stress and anxiety.

“SUDS is an acronym that stands for Subjective Units of Distress Scale.

**S**ubjective = Personal, Your own

**U**nits = Comparison

**D**istress = Upset

**S**cale = Measurement; a way to communicate

“The SUDS ranges from 0 to 100. A SUDS of 0 indicates no distress, and 100 is the most distress you have ever felt. For many of you, the most upset, discomfort, or distress you have ever felt may have been while you were in combat.

**“Can everyone remember what it felt like to be a 100/100 on the SUDS scale?”** *(Most Veterans will easily recall being a 100/100). A 100 should be something that you rarely experience. It may even be the traumatic event.*

“Sometimes, individuals have a harder time remembering a time when they were not in any distress, or a 0/100. Try to think about a memory when you were relaxed, calm, without distress, even if for only a few moments. **Can everyone remember what it feels like to be a 0?”** *(Some Veterans may have to remember a time before they were in the military; others will not be able to remember a time where they were relaxed. For these individuals, focus on a lack of distress).*

“Please give a SUDS rating of how you are feeling right now. Think of the SUDS as a mental or emotional thermometer. When you take your body’s temperature, it fluctuates from moment to moment, and so does the SUDS. How you feel now may be different from a minute ago or a minute from now.

“Give me a SUDS rating for how you feel now. Write this down so that you can compare it to your ratings after calm breathing.”

## Calm Breathing<sup>2</sup>

### **Rationale:**

“Most realize that your breathing affects the way that you feel. For example, when you are upset, people may tell you to take a deep breath and calm down. However, taking a deep breath often does not help. Instead, to calm down, you should take a normal breath and exhale slowly.

“For instance, think of when you played hide-and-seek as a child. When the seeker would get close, what would happen? You would hold your breath until he/she passed, as you got ready to react or run. When you exhaled, this was part of the relief from the tension you built up. It is the exhale or breath out that is associated with relaxation, rather than the breath in.

“Think of what happens when runners prepare for a race. They breathe heavily and jump up and down—increasing their oxygen to get ready to sprint down the lanes. To relax, you want to do the opposite of that. Instead of increasing the oxygen to your muscles, which is what happens when you take a deep breath, you want to decrease the amount of oxygen to your muscles, forcing them to relax.

“In breathing retraining or calm breathing, you are going to learn to slow the rate and amount of our breaths. You will learn to take normal breaths in through your nose (decreasing the amount of oxygen), followed by long breaths out, and then slow down your breathing by holding after the exhale (slowing the rate). You also want to use a cue word for relaxation.

“This cue word should be 1 word that you find relaxing. It is best if it is not a word that has other meaning, like *sleep* or *time out*. Common ones used are *calm*, *peace*, or *relax*. Or you can be more creative using imagery words that you find relaxing, such as *cloud* or *stream*.”

*Have a few Veterans share their word with the group, and ask all Veterans to write their word down in their manuals in the space provided (page 7 of Veteran Manual).*

## **PRACTICAL APPLICATION: Calm Breathing**

### **Directions:**

“Take a normal breath in through your nose. Hold it for four seconds...1...2...3...4. Now exhale slowly, while saying your word to yourself. Pause again before repeating the normal breath in.”

### **Demonstration:**

Demonstrate calm breathing for a couple of breaths.

### **Practice:**

Lead Veterans in calm breathing exercise for a few minutes.

### **Feedback:**

Ask the group how that felt. “Did you notice any struggle with the breathing? Did anyone get out of breath? Did anyone become lightheaded? As with any new skill, this will take practice. It can be hard to know what a normal breath is like. If you became lightheaded, you likely were breathing too little. If you felt an increase in heart rate or other symptoms of anxiety, you might be taking in too much air. Practice will help you find your normal breath and master this technique.”

## How relaxation can help me

“Anxiety is a learned response.  
Relaxation is a skill that counters the anxiety response.  
But it takes practice.  
The goal of relaxation is to be awake while relaxed.”

### Using the RL:

*After the exercise has been completed, have the Veterans complete the RL for that day.*

“To help you see the benefits of relaxation and to communicate whether it is helping you, please fill out these RLs (*pass the RLs out to the group*). Since we practiced calm breathing in session, please put an “X” next to this relaxation technique on the card. This means that today you completed this exercise.”

## Assignment # 1

*Instruct Veterans to refer to the list of references on the last page of the Veteran Manual for the calm breathing demonstration (i.e., Track 1 of Harry S. Truman Memorial Veterans’ Hospital’s Relaxation Recordings on page 27 of this manual and page 17 in in the Veteran Manual). Ask Veterans to practice as often as possible over the next week.*

*Time permitting, ask Veterans to verbalize how many times they think they will be able to practice the technique, and record this on sign in sheet.*

*Remind the group to complete the RL and return with it the next week.*



# SESSION 2: OUTLINE

*(Beginning on page 8 of the Veteran Manual)*

## **I. REVIEW:**

- A. Review homework with Veterans, including problems they may have had completing it.

## **II. DIDACTIC:**

- A. Ask Veterans what their stress triggers are.
- B. Have Veterans write down their physical and emotional signs of stress.
- C. Differentiate between relaxation and deep relaxation.
- D. Discuss the 5 roadblocks to doing relaxation techniques and potential ways to overcome these.

## **III. PRACTICAL APPLICATION:**

- A. Give the rationale for PMR.
- B. Practice PMR.
- C. Have Veterans give you a SUDS rating aloud, following PMR.
- D. Have Veterans complete the RL.

## **IV. ASSIGNMENT #2:**

- A. Practice PMR.
- B. Continue RL.

# SESSION 2

**Review Assignment #1.** Collect the RL from each Veteran. What problems did they encounter doing calm breathing or the log? Did they have any problems or concerns? Did they get better at it?

## What are your stress triggers?

“Your stress triggers are your unique anxiety response. There are physical and emotional components to them.”

*Have Veterans discuss and write down what they are like when anxious. Discuss which problems come first.*

## Relaxation versus Deep Relaxation

“Many things are relaxing, like watching television, playing on the computer, sitting on the front porch, and watching a sunset.

“However, the type of relaxing that makes a difference in anxiety is deep relaxing. Deep relaxation refers to a distinct physiological state that is the exact opposite of the way your body reacts under stress or during an anxiety attack.

“The state of deep relaxation involves decreasing your heart rate, respiration rate, blood pressure, skeletal muscle tension, and oxygen consumption, while increasing your skin resistance (indicating muscle relaxation), alpha- wave activity in the brain (indicating a deep state of relaxation), and analytical thinking.

“Regular, daily practice of deep relaxation leads to being in a more relaxed state throughout the day—not just when actively practicing these techniques.”

## Benefits<sup>5</sup>

“Research shows that practicing relaxation on a regular basis aids in...

- Reduction of general anxiety\*
- Prevention of additional stressors
- Increased energy and productivity
- Improved concentration and memory\*
- Reduction of insomnia and fatigue\*
- Prevention of physical problems
- Increased self-confidence
- Increased availability of feelings\*

\*While all these benefits will be helpful to you, 4 are specifically related to PTSD: nervousness, concentration problems, insomnia, and emotional numbing.”

## PMR<sup>10</sup>

### Rationale:

“When people feel anxious, they also become physiologically aroused. This may include hyperventilation, increased heart rate, sweating, trembling, and muscle tension. This physical response, in turn, makes them more anxious.

“The goal of PMR is to increase awareness of tension while giving you a way to release it. Noticing the contrast between tension and relaxation is important to be able to dispel it.”

## PRACTICAL APPLICATION: PMR

### Directions:

“We will be sequentially tensing and relaxing various muscle groups. Each muscle should be tensed at a level of 50% - you do not want to strain. If you have pain in any part of your body, just skip that muscle group, instead focusing on your breathing. We will hold the tension in each muscle group for 10 seconds, and then hold the relaxation for 30 seconds.

“In the interest of time, we will be doing each muscle group only once. At home, when you practice, repeat with each muscle group twice, allowing for even greater relaxation of each body part.”

### Demonstration:

*Using the first muscle group (wrists), tense, hold, and relax to show the Veterans what will be expected in the practical application portion of the session.*

### Practice:

“Begin by uncrossing your arms and legs. Focus gently on a point in front of you somewhere on the floor or, if you feel comfortable, close your eyes. Just allow yourself to relax as much as possible, and focus on each muscle group as we proceed. Now focus your attention on... (see list of muscle groups on the next page of this manual and page 10 in the Veteran Manual).”

*It also is helpful to make the following statements:*

*“Allow your muscles to relax.”*

*“Notice the difference between tensing and relaxing.”*

*“Let yourself relax as much as you feel comfortable.”*

*“This is your time to relax; there is no need to hurry.”*

*“Notice any heaviness, tingling, or warmth in your muscles as they relax.”*

## **PMRMUSCLE GROUPS**

**“Clench your fists.**

**Bend your hands backward at the wrists.**

**Flex your biceps muscles.**

**Push shoulders back into the chair.**

**Hunch your shoulders up toward your ears.**

**Tilt your head to your left shoulder.**

**Tilt your head to your right shoulder.**

**With your head down, tuck your chin toward your chest.**

**Press your head back against the chair.**

**Take a deep breath, and hold it for a few seconds.**

**Tense your stomach by tightening your muscles.**

**Wrinkle up your forehead and brow.**

**Close your eyes tightly.**

**Open your mouth wide.**

**Pucker up your lips.**

**Bite down slightly on your back teeth.**

**Arch your back like a cat.**

**Stretch out your right leg, and bend your toes back.**

**Stretch out your left leg, and bend your toes back.**

**Stretch out your right leg, and point your toes away from your body.**

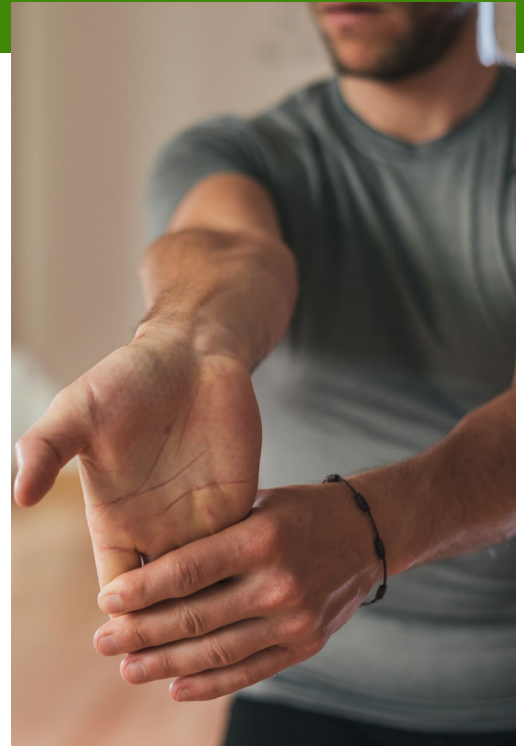
**Stretch out your left leg, and point your toes away from your body.**

**Curl up your toes in your shoes.”**

### **Feedback:**

**“How was that exercise? Were you able to notice any differences in muscle groups after tensing and relaxing? Did anyone have any discomfort (if so, remember to skip or modify those groups)?”**

“As with learning any skill—like driving a car, playing the piano or riding a bike—you do better if you practice on a regular basis. It can be difficult to actually do, so let’s talk about a few barriers you may face when you try to practice.”





## Problem-solving Roadblocks<sup>6</sup>



### *I don't have the time to practice.*

“Try giving yourself time to relax. Plan for it - pick a regular time each day to practice. Remember how this will help your PTSD symptoms, which may help motivate you to practice.”



### *There is no place to relax at home.*

“Create a place to relax. Discuss with your family the importance of doing this so they can understand and help you achieve the goal of practicing. Let your family know when and where you will be doing the relaxing.”



### *This is slow and boring.*

“Sometimes relaxing can feel slow and boring because you are used to feeling anxious. This does not mean that it isn't good for you—and doing this exercise will likely become easier and more enjoyable with practice.”



### *I feel more anxious when I relax.*

“It is not uncommon to feel more anxious when you first start to practice Progressive Relaxation. Relaxation takes practice. It may help for you to shorten the amount of time you are spending practicing relaxation and gradually work up to 20 - 30 minutes per day.”



### *I just don't have the drive to do it.*

“With practice, you will reap the benefits of relaxation and, in turn, feel more like practicing. In the meantime, remember to act ‘as if’ you feel like doing it. Remember that this lack of drive is a part of your disorder and can be overcome.”

## ASSIGNMENT # 2

***Instruct Veterans to practice PMR (using the resources on page 17 in the Veteran Manual) as often as possible, but at least once over the next week.***

***Ask Veterans to verbalize how many times they will practice the technique, and record this on the sign-in sheet. Remind them to complete the RL and return with it the next week.***



# SESSION 3: OUTLINE

*(Beginning on page 12 of the Veteran Manual)*

## **I. REVIEW:**

- A. Review relaxation practice (Assignment #2).

## **II. DIDACTIC:**

- A. Understanding Anxiety.
  - a. Where does anxiety stem from?
  - b. Avoidance as a learned behavior.
  - c. Thoughts that fuel anxiety.
  - d. Bad habits that cause/worsen anxiety.
  
- B. 20 Positive Coping Strategies for Anxiety.
  - a. Physical & Lifestyle.
  - b. Cognitive.
  - c. Emotional.
  - d. Spiritual/Philosophical.

## **III. PRACTICAL APPLICATION**

- A. Describe the rationale for self-guided imagery.
- B. Teach guided imagery.

## **IV. ASSIGNMENT #3**

- A. Practice relaxation technique.
- B. Continue completing the RL.

# SESSION 3

**Review Assignment #2.** What problems did Veterans encounter doing PMR or the log? Did they have any problems or concerns? Did they get better at it?

## Understanding Anxiety

### Where does anxiety stem from?

“Anxiety is an extreme version of an alarm reaction your body naturally goes through in response to a threat. The fight-or-flight response helps you to avoid threats of danger and ensure your survival. However, because you have been through a traumatic event, your fight-or-flight response may occur in situations that are realistically safe.”

**1. Avoidance.** “ Avoidance is a learned behavior. Certain conditions (e.g., people, places, things, thoughts) make you nervous, so you learn to associate anxiety with these things. When you avoid that condition, your anxiety decreases for a moment, and, therefore, you learn that avoiding the situation lessens anxiety in the short term.

“This is how chronic avoidance develops. In the short run, it is rewarding to avoid facing things that make you nervous. However, in the long run, avoidance will snowball-- That is, you have to avoid more and more to decrease your anxiety. Therefore, in the long run, avoidance reinforces and increases overall anxiety, prolonging PTSD and preventing necessary learning.”

**2. Thoughts.** “What you say to yourself can create and worsen anxiety. Much anxiety is created by thoughts beginning with, “What if...” (something bad happens). Using “what if” anticipates the worst-case scenario and increases your anxiety.”

**3. Bad Habits.** “Stimulants such as caffeine and nicotine worsen anxiety. Most people have a tolerance to these substances and do not recognize the impact they have on their anxiety until they give them up. If you have an anxiety disorder or anxiety related to a trauma-related disorder, it may be worth it for you to quit using stimulants.”

## 20 POSITIVE COPING STRATEGIES FOR ANXIETY

“It is important to use a comprehensive approach to overcome anxiety. Although this group focuses most on the physiological response to anxiety, it is important to acknowledge and try to incorporate other techniques that decrease anxiety. These include the following:

| PHYSICAL & LIFESTYLE   | SPIRITUALITY & ATTITUDE   | EMOTIONAL  | COGNITIVE/MENTAL  |
|--|---|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Calm breathing</li><li>• Relaxation techniques</li><li>• Regular exercise</li><li>• Low-stress diet</li><li>• Downtime</li><li>• Time management</li><li>• Sleep hygiene</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Working toward goals</li><li>• Positive philosophy</li><li>• Religious commitment</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Social support</li><li>• Self-nurturing</li><li>• Good communication</li><li>• Assertiveness</li><li>• Recreational activities</li><li>• Humor</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Countering negative thoughts</li><li>• Distraction</li><li>• Acceptance</li><li>• Tolerance</li></ul> |

“The relaxation technique we are going to learn today uses progressive relaxation to aid in improving confidence – or the cognitive aspect of anxiety. It is called self-guided imagery.

“Guided imagery is a way of deliberately using imagery to modify your behavior, feelings, and internal physiological state.

“Guided imagery is used by athletes to help them achieve peak performance. For example, pro-baseball players visualize hitting the ball when the bases are loaded.

“It also is used to treat a number of physical and mental problems. For example, it is used with cancer patients to visualize chemotherapy targeting cancer cells.

“Guided imagery is used to treat anxiety by placing you in a state of progressive relaxation and then having you imagine improving your confidence in any number of situations (e.g., being in a crowded place, having a heart-to-heart talk, speaking up in groups).

#### “What should you imagine?”

- Something you have been avoiding but want to do.
- Upcoming difficult situations.
- An important event.

“We will start with sunlight meditation to become relaxed, and then add in guided imagery for an avoided situation for those of you who want to try this. It is important that you choose a situation to imagine before we begin.

“If you do not want to try to imagine an avoided situation, please continue to practice relaxing until this portion of the exercise is complete.”

### **PRACTICE: Sunlight Meditation + Guided Imagery<sup>5</sup>**

*Inform the group that if they wish to record these practices with their mobile devices or recorder to replay outside of sessions they may do so.*

“Picture yourself in a safe, beautiful place outdoors. Now imagine that you feel a warm, gentle breeze blowing. Overhead you can see a blue sky and some white clouds. Shining directly overhead is the sun.

“Now imagine that you can feel the warmth and light from the sun directly above you. Try to feel it shining down—in and through your entire body. Feel it beginning to relax and soothe your mind and body.

“Now, let’s concentrate this sunlight onto your right arm. Focus it there. Just experience the warmth and light from the sun penetrating the fingertips of your right hand. Feel it soothing and relaxing your right hand. And, in a moment, it begins to spread from your right hand to your forearm... and then to your upper arm... and then to your shoulder. Feel the sunlight warming and soothing your entire right arm. You can feel it filling and soothing every muscle, tendon, and nerve in your right arm. Feel your right arm—from the tips of your fingers to your shoulders—becoming completely relaxed. Warm, heavy and relaxed.

“Now move the light from the sun to your left arm. Imagine it entering and soothing your left hand. And, in a moment, you can begin to feel it moving from your left hand up your left arm... soothing your forearm... and then your upper arm... moving all the way up to your shoulder. You’re relaxing all the muscles, nerves, and tendons in your left arm... feeling the light penetrating and soothing your entire left arm. Just continue to let yourself drift deeper and deeper in to quietness and peace... feeling very safe, secure, and relaxed.

“And, now, take the light from the sun and move it over to your right leg. Allow it to move from the tips of your toes all the way up your right leg to the hip joint. Feel the warmth as the sunlight moves up through your right leg, from your right foot to your right calf... and then to your right knee...

“...and then to your right thigh... and finally to your right hip bone. Just feel the sunlight penetrating and soothing every muscle, tendon, and nerve in your right leg and hip. Your entire right leg is feeling completely warm and relaxed.

“In a moment, feel the sunlight move to your left leg. Allow it to move from your left foot up through your entire left leg to your hip bone. Feel it soothing and relaxing your left ankle... then your calf... and then your knee... and then soothing all the muscles in your thigh... and finally moving up into your hip. You can feel the sunlight penetrating every muscle, tendon, and nerve in your entire left leg. And in a moment, you find your left leg feeling completely relaxed.

“Now move the light from the sun into your stomach area. Just feel it warming and soothing every organ in the lower part of your body. Just feel the pressures and tensions of the day draining away from you... as your stomach and lower abdomen relax completely. Feel your stomach and lower abdomen becoming very relaxed.

“Now take the light from the sun, and move it into your chest area. Let it soothe and comfort that area. Just feel it streaming into your chest. You’re feeling relaxation... peace... and comfort throughout your entire chest... feeling your chest becoming very relaxed and your breathing becoming easy.

“Now, in a moment, bring the light from the sun down through the top of your head. Imagine it soothing and comforting the top of your head... and then the area around your eyes... and then your jaw. And in a moment, feel the warm, soothing sensations of the sunlight moving down into your neck, relaxing and releasing every tight muscle in your neck. In a while, you can feel your neck completely relaxing. Your head and neck are becoming completely relaxed.

“Now let the sunlight move down your spine, down through your spine all the way to your tailbone. And then imagine the light moving out from your spine into every nerve of your body. Feel the sunlight moving into every nerve of your body, healing and relaxing. Feel yourself entering a very deep state of calm.

“Just allow yourself to drift deeper and deeper into quietness and calm... becoming more and more relaxed. In a moment you can feel the sunlight relaxing and soothing every single cell in your body. Every single cell in your body is becoming very relaxed. And you feel yourself becoming very deeply relaxed...

“Continue to relax, while taking a few moments to imagine the situation that you want to visualize.

“See yourself starting the situation and engaging fully in it. Picture yourself going through the situation with confidence and completing it successfully. Imagine how you’ll feel when you have

successfully reached this goal. See yourself fully involved... doing what you want to do... feeling calm, comfortable, and confident..." (Allow about 1 minute to visualize.)

"You know that there is no longer any need to avoid this situation or to feel anxious in it. You can find yourself in this situation feeling calm, safe, and assured. As you enter this situation, your breathing is calm and regular, and all your muscles are fully relaxed. It's truly easy to enter this situation, and it feels just fine. You experience a sensation of relaxation all over..."

"Picture yourself reaching your goal and feeling proud of yourself for it. You're feeling confident that you can handle this situation every time you return to it. It feels great to have the freedom to enter this situation... to have fully achieved your goal... to have fully left the past behind... to be able to do what you want. Your life is enlarged by your success.

"You can be calm and at ease whenever you're in this particular situation...comfortable... easy... calm... you've gained the mastery of yourself you've wanted all along. You can enjoy life fully... knowing that you feel safe and confident whenever you enter this particular situation.

"Now take a few minutes once again to imagine yourself handling the situation in just the way you would like... Notice what you're doing...(15 seconds or more)... How you would think, act, and feel, having achieved your goal with this particular situation (a few more seconds)..."

"Okay, now when you are done, slowly open your eyes, feeling calm, confident, alert and relaxed."

### ASSIGNMENT # 3

*Instruct Veterans to practice the relaxation techniques learned in session as often as possible but at least twice over the next week.*

*Ask Veterans to verbalize how many times they will practice the technique, and record this on sign in sheet.*

*Remind Veterans to complete the RL and return with it the next week.*



# SESSION 4: OUTLINE

*(Beginning on page 14 of the Veteran Manual)*

## **I. REVIEW:**

- A. Review Relaxation Assignment #3.

## **II. DIDACTIC:**

- A. Grounding.
- B. What grounding is.
- C. What it does.
- D. The 3 types of grounding:
  - a. Mental.
  - b. Physical.
  - c. Soothing.
- E. How to make sure grounding works for you (done after the Practical Application).

## **III. PRACTICAL APPLICATION:**

- A. Describe each type of grounding in detail, giving examples.
- B. Lead Veterans through an abbreviated mental, physical and soothing grounding (return to Didactic II above).

## **IV. TERMINATION:**

- A. Remind Veterans to practice the relaxation techniques.
- B. Thank Veterans for their participation.

# SESSION 4

**Review Assignment #3.** Did the Veterans have any problems or concerns practicing relaxation techniques or the log? Did they get better at it?

## GROUNDING TECHNIQUES

### What grounding is:

“Grounding is a way to detach from emotional pain. Grounding is also called centering, looking outward, distraction, or healthy detachment, it works by focusing outward on the world, rather than inward on the self.”

### What it does:

“Grounding is an anchor to the present. When focusing on the here and now, it is impossible to focus on painful memories from the past or worries about the future. Many people with PTSD move back and forth from between being overwhelmed by emotion or having too little of it (being emotionally numb). When using grounding, you learn to bring yourself into balance when emotions are overwhelming, by placing yourself at a healthy distance from these emotions.”

### Overview:

- “Grounding can be done anytime and anywhere.
- Grounding can be used when you are faced with negative feelings.
- Keep your eyes open and turn the room light on during grounding.
- Rate your mood before and after each grounding (SUDS 0-100 = worst).”

### ***Go over SUDS (introduced in session 2) as a review.***

- “Do not talk about negative feelings during grounding.
- Stay neutral—do not make judgments during grounding. For example,
- if you are describing a room—do not say, “The room is beige; I hate beige.”
- Focus on the present, not the past or future.”

## THREE TYPES OF GROUNDING: MENTAL, PHYSICAL, AND SOOTHING.

- **Mental Grounding:** Focusing your mind.
- **Physical Grounding:** Focusing your senses.
- **Soothing:** Talking to yourself in a very kind way.

### MENTAL GROUNDING:

- “Play categories with yourself—e.g., name football quarterbacks, jazz musicians, types of dogs, TV shows, songs, or cities.
- Describe your environment in detail.
- Describe an activity in detail—describe how to make red beans and rice. First, you buy the following ingredients... Maybe describe a food that is comforting for you.
- Use a safety statement: ‘My name is\_\_\_\_\_. I am safe right now. I am in the present, not the past. I am located in \_\_\_\_\_. The date is\_\_\_\_\_.’”



## PHYSICAL GROUNDING:

- “Run cool water over your hands.
- Grab tightly onto your chair as hard as you can.
- Touch various objects around you and describe them to yourself.
- Dig your heels into the floor.
- Carry a grounding object in your pocket (a rock, ring, piece of cloth).
- Stretch your muscles.”

## SOOTHING GROUNDING:

- “Say kind statements to yourself, such as, ‘I am a good person. I will get through this. All things pass. I am OK.’
- Think of favorites or something to look forward to next week (e.g., your favorite color, food, season, time of day or going to a movie, seeing a friend).
- Picture people you care about (imagine them, or have a photograph available). Remember a safe place (describe a place you find very soothing—this can be the safe place you use for the other relaxation exercises)
- Say a coping statement: ‘I can handle this. This feeling will pass.’”

## How to make sure grounding works for you...

- “Practice as often as possible (even if you feel grounded already).
- Practice faster.
- Try grounding for a long time (and repeat, repeat, repeat).
- Make an index card.
- Prepare in advance.
- Start grounding early in the negative mood cycle.
- Think about why grounding works – why might it be that by focusing
- on the external world you become more aware of an inner peacefulness?
- Note which methods work best for you and use them.
- Don’t give up! Remember, it becomes easier over time.”

## PRACTICE: Mental Grounding<sup>4</sup>

“For this grounding exercise, you are going to describe your environment in detail, using all of your senses. You will describe objects, sounds, textures, colors, smells, shapes, numbers and the temperature.” Lead Veterans through describing the room silently to themselves. Remind them not to judge the room, but to simply describe it to themselves. “Look around the room. What is above you? What is the ceiling made of? How do you think it would feel to the touch? How many light sources are there in the room? How many windows? What color is the floor? What is it made of? How does it feel to touch it? What is on the walls? What colors do you see there? Read anything printed backward and notice each letter or number. What shapes are on the walls? How many different shapes? How many chairs are in the room? Tables? Other furniture? What are the chairs made of? What are the tables made of? How does each part feel to the touch- hot, cold, rough, smooth? Is there any smell to the room? Notice it. How warm or cold is the room? Do you hear any air movement? From where? Do you hear any other sounds? Where are they coming from?”

**Note: Continue with other questions to tailor other questions to your specific room. Ask questions about the Veterans’ experience of the grounding exercise.**

# TERMINATION

“During the last month, you learned about stress and anxiety, the impact it has on your life, and ways to reduce and cope with it.

“It is our hope that you will continue to use the calm breathing, relaxation techniques, and grounding to cope with anxiety and stress.

“Please keep your manual and refer back to it, to review what you have learned in relaxation enhancement and stress management.

**“Thank you for attending the STRESS LESS groups—we have enjoyed working with you.”**



# VETERAN RESOURCES

## Mobile App:

- US Department of Veterans Affairs. (2018). Mindful Coach (2.1) [Mobile application]. Retrieved from: [https://www.ptsd.va.gov/appvid/mobile/mindfulcoach\\_app.asp](https://www.ptsd.va.gov/appvid/mobile/mindfulcoach_app.asp)

## Audio Downloads:

- Harry S. Truman Memorial Veterans' Hospital's Relaxation Recordings. Track 1: Introduction and Relaxed Breathing; Track 2: Passive Muscle Relaxation; Track 3: Progressive Muscle Relaxation; Track 4: Visualization; and Track 5: Mindfulness and Meditation [Audio downloads]. Retrieved from: [https://www.columbiamo.va.gov/services/Relaxation\\_Recordings.asp](https://www.columbiamo.va.gov/services/Relaxation_Recordings.asp)
- Connelly, Mark. (2015, July 23). Progressive Muscle Relaxation.[Video file]. Retrieved from: <https://youtu.be/ihO02wUzgkc>
- Fairweather, David. (2011, November 15). Self Hypnosis: Visualization Method. [Video file]. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RyMX5Pon2kw>



# STRESS MANAGEMENT GROUP SURVEY

**1. How problematic is anxiety for you?**

1    2    3    4    5    6    7  
Not at all    Moderately    Extremely

**2. Overall, how USEFUL was the Stress Management group?**

1    2    3    4    5    6    7  
Not at all    Moderately    Extremely

**3. In general, how SATISFIED are you with the Stress Management group?**

1    2    3    4    5    6    7  
Not at all    Moderately    Extremely

**4. If you decided to use the exercises presented in group, how confident are you that they would be helpful?**

1    2    3    4    5    6    7  
Not at all    Moderately    Extremely

**5. Do you intend to use any of the relaxation strategies taught?**

Yes    No

# STRESS MANAGEMENT GROUP SURVEY

**Note: Not everyone is able to practice the exercises that were introduced.**

**1. On average, how many times per week did you practice the calm breathing exercise?**

\_\_\_\_\_ I was not able to practice at all (skip to question 3)

\_\_\_\_\_ less than once per week (continue)

\_\_\_\_\_ 1-2 times per week (continue)

\_\_\_\_\_ 3-4 times per week (continue)

\_\_\_\_\_ daily (continue)

**2. How effective was this technique to cope with anxiety?**

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

Not at all

Moderately

Extremely

**3. On average, how many times per week did you practice one of the relaxation techniques (progressive muscle relaxation, self-hypnosis, imagery)?**

\_\_\_\_\_ I was not able to practice at all (skip to question 5)

\_\_\_\_\_ less than once per week (continue)

\_\_\_\_\_ 1-2 times per week (continue)

\_\_\_\_\_ 3-4 times per week (continue)

\_\_\_\_\_ daily (continue)

**4. How effective were these techniques to cope with anxiety?**

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

Not at all

Moderately

Extremely

**5. On average, how many times per week did you practice one of the grounding (mental, physical or soothing)?**

\_\_\_\_\_ I was not able to practice at all (end)

\_\_\_\_\_ less than once per week (continue)

\_\_\_\_\_ 1-2 times per week (continue)

\_\_\_\_\_ 3-4 times per week (continue)

\_\_\_\_\_ daily (continue)

**6. How effective were these techniques to cope with anxiety?**

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

Not at all

Moderately

Extremely