



Calming Skills

The *Calming Skills* book is focused on helping you learn different strategies for calming yourself during your recovery. After a traumatic experience, it is normal to have physical reactions that include muscle tension, rapid heartbeat, sweatiness, and feeling jittery or on-edge. One way to help yourself if you are feeling tense is to learn some simple relaxation or calming skills. In this book, you will learn how to use deep breathing, muscle relaxation, and positive imagery to reduce your tension and anxiety. The strategies in this book are very easy to use and helpful to give you important skills to manage your physical and emotional distress.

Introduction

The focus of these books is to help empower individuals to be able to more effectively cope with traumatic life events. These e-books are built from solid scientific evidence. This evidence has shown that when people know what to expect and how to best deal with different demands related to trauma, they are able to more effectively manage traumatic stress and find ways to grow personally from the experience. It is also true that everyone has a limit, so it is critical to know what the signs are that point to being completely “upside down” when dealing with trauma and when to seek outside support or professional help.

The books in this series are:

1. *The Way Ahead*
2. *How to Get Support During Recovery*
3. *What You Tell Yourself Matters*
4. *Coping With Trauma Reminders*
5. *What Not to Do!*
6. *Getting Professional Help: Step by Step*
7. *Calming Skills: The Essentials of Managing Traumatic Stress.*

We have provided options for you to purchase all of the books as one large book or individually depending on what your needs are.

The book presented here is a book focused on helping you learn different strategies for calming yourself during your recovery. Trauma recovery often feels like things are out of control including physical reactions. The strategies in this book are very easy to use and helpful to give you important skills to manage your physical and emotional distress. We hope you find it helpful.

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The Way Ahead

This book is designed for one thing and one thing only—as a practical guide to help you cope more effectively with an experience that has deeply affected your life, possibly turning it upside down. There is a series of six books, each with its own focus on different aspects of trauma recovery.



Before we discuss how to learn important calming techniques that can help you in your recovery, I would like to explain what is involved in dealing with a tragic life experience and how you can best help yourself, and your loved ones, to start your journey to recovery. Each book is a “pick up and go” workbook with specific exercises and tools to help you help yourself. I will be extremely practical and direct in this book. When people face life’s unpredictable tragedies, we have found that they do not have time for idle chat or psychobabble so we have tried to be as direct and focused on skills that will aid in recovery. We now turn to discuss how to gain specific skills in learning how to calm yourself down during your recovery.

Calming Skills: The Essentials of Managing Traumatic Stress

After a traumatic experience, it is normal to have physical reactions that include muscle tension, rapid heartbeat, sweatiness, and feeling jittery or on-edge. One way to help yourself if you are feeling tense is to learn some simple relaxation or calming skills.

In this book, you will learn how to use deep breathing, muscle relaxation, and positive imagery to reduce your tension and anxiety. The skills you will learn include ways to:

- Breathe more slowly,
- Relax different muscles in your body using progressive muscle relaxation, and
- Use positive imagery to imagine yourself in a relaxing situation.

If you practice these relaxing skills regularly, you will likely experience:

- Slower, more regular breathing,
- Lower blood pressure,
- Slower heart rate, and
- Increased control over stress reactions.

Relaxation or calming strategies are all different. In some ways, they are like restaurants. Some you’ll like and some you won’t. For each strategy, I will describe it

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first, and then provide a “how to” guide to help you practice that skill. I recommend that you sample all of the strategies and then choose one to practice until you are comfortable with it. Once you have practiced your preferred strategy, you can use it to make dealing with your trauma recovery easier.



These strategies will help you calm yourself when something reminds you of the trauma and you feel upset—we call these “trauma reminders.” Being able to do something to calm yourself down will give you a greater sense of control, which is very important in recovery from trauma.

It is likely that trauma reminders will often cause your body to react without much warning. Learning tension reduction skills can give you a way to cope more effectively when you are “triggered” by something that reminds you of your experience.

Try These Relaxation Methods

Breathing as a Skill. When we are anxious, we often breathe more shallowly and quickly. Learning to slow your breathing can help you tremendously. As you learn this skill, you will feel more in control. Often people think they know how to breathe or think it might be a silly thing to practice, but it is a very useful and easy-to-learn tension reduction method.

How to Breathe. This is the way I suggest you try the breathing exercise. Just take a minute to read over the steps:

Hold your breath and count to 5 (Do not take a deep breath first)
When you reach 5, breathe out slowly and say the word "relax..."
Breathe in slowly for three seconds, "1...2...3 in."
Breathe out slowly for three seconds, "1...2...3 out."
Say the word "relax" to yourself every time you breathe out
Repeat and notice where your body feels more relaxed.

As you do the exercise, experiment to find what works for you. Focus on how fast or slow you need to go, how much air you need to take in. You don't have to breathe too deeply, just a little deeper than normal, at a slightly slower pace than normal. At first, you might find it difficult to concentrate on your breathing. Other thoughts might come into your mind. One of the important parts of this exercise is to learn to focus on your breathing, as this will help you to relax the most. So, if you have trouble concentrating on your breathing at first, realize that this is normal. Your mind is dealing with something that is serious and is working extra hard. When you notice that you are thinking about other things, focus again on your breathing. Focusing on your breathing will get easier the more you practice.

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The key to relaxing breathing is to breathe from lower in your stomach/abdomen and not from your chest. When people are stressed, they tend to tighten their chest muscles and breathe very shallowly and rapidly. This increases muscle tension and can increase your distress. The opposite of this is to breathe from the diaphragm, right below where your ribs separate. It can be quite helpful to put a hand on your stomach just below where your ribs separate and notice how your stomach rises and lowers as you take regular slow breaths.

Try the Full Exercise. If this strategy is working for you, try a longer practice right now and do the breathing routine for about 10 in-and-out breaths. You might even visualize in your mind each number as you go from one to 10. It may be hard at first to get all the way to 10 without having your mind interrupt you. That's ok, just start again and do this as long as you would like.

Breathing Practice Plan. We suggest that you practice the breathing skill at least one time each day for the next week or so. You should take about 10 minutes for your practice. Also, use the breathing whenever you are feeling tense as you go through your daily routine. It should help to reduce your tension and help you feel more in control.

Muscle Relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation training involves learning how to tense and relax your muscles. If you can become more aware of the difference between tension and relaxation in your body, it will help you to manage your stress and gain more control over your tension.



This strategy helps you to get a strong sense of how your body feels when it is tense and when it is relaxed. Many people who have gone through a traumatic experience lose a sense of how their body feels when it is relaxed. Their bodies go into a kind of chronic “alert” mode. When you are recovering from a trauma, there is so much to figure out that you direct your attention away from your body. This can lead you to be less aware of how tense or wound-up your body has become. Progressive muscle relaxation helps you to become aware of your body again and learn a way of relaxing it.

How It Works. With this muscle relaxation exercise, you will move through all the parts of your body one by one, tensing a specific part (such as your hand, arm, chest, and thigh) and then relaxing it.

Try making your hand into a fist and squeezing it tightly. This tenses the hand and the forearm.

Squeeze it for seven seconds. Don't squeeze as hard as you can, just squeeze tight.

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Now, quickly let go of the tension by relaxing your hand and making it floppy. As you release the tension, notice the difference in tension in your hand when you tighten it and how relaxed it feels when you “let go.” The idea of letting go is central to this relaxation skill. Each time you tense and relax visualize letting go of all the tension in your body.

Try it again now. Do you notice the difference between how tense your hand and arm feel when you're squeezing and how relaxed they feel right after you quickly stop squeezing?

The Exercise. Ok, if you have the idea, you can try out the longer exercise, which moves through different parts of your body.

Step 1: Close your eyes and take three slow breaths. Use the breathing guide above to help you.

Step 2: Starting with your right hand, squeeze the hand into a fist and hold for seven seconds, concentrating on the tension you feel in the hand and forearm muscles.



Step 3: Release the tension by letting your hand relax. Take special notice of how relaxed your muscles feel now that you've let go of the tension.

Step 4: Repeat Steps 1, 2, and 3 with each of these parts of the body: upper arms, forehead, eye muscles, jaw, back of the neck, shoulders, chest, stomach, lower back, thighs, calves, and feet. If you notice any cramping of your muscles (typically found in calves or feet) let go more quickly (count to four or five and then relax).

Practice, Practice, Practice. I recommend that you practice doing active progressive muscle relaxation at least once each day for the next seven days. Make sure you choose a time to practice when you won't be interrupted.

Relaxation Journey: Positive Imagery Visualization

The final relaxation skill is positive imagery. Often, imagining yourself in a nice, relaxing and safe place can help you to actually *feel* more relaxed. It is understandable that even thinking about a safe or relaxing place can be difficult after a serious trauma, especially if the trauma was violent. However, taking a “mental holiday” where you have a few minutes to think of a place you love, or maybe a place you would like to be someday, can be very helpful.

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Take a minute to think about what place you'd like to imagine. Some examples include lying on the beach listening to the ocean, or relaxing in a hammock in the mountains listening to the birds. If you are having a difficult time doing this, try doing the breathing exercise first. Then, after you have calmed yourself, shift into your visual image. When you can see your image, try to “see” everything about the image. Imagine the sounds, sights, smells, even how things feel there. For example, if you are imagining being in a mountain meadow, you might smell the scent of the flowers or the trees, see the blue sky, hear the birds and the wind, etc. The more you can focus on these details the more you allow your body to relax and rejuvenate.

Take a Mental Holiday! This skill builds on the other relaxation techniques you have learned.

Step 1: Take three relaxing slow breaths.

Step 2: Use Muscle Relaxation to get yourself into a more relaxed state.

Step 3: Visualize yourself in a wonderful, relaxing place.



Your goal is to escape into that place and focus on feeling relaxed, at peace, safe, and comfortable. Again, you can use the relaxation guide to walk you through this segment if you prefer.

Practice! The key to these skills is to practice them as often as you can. The more you practice, the more you will be able to reduce physical tension and gain a greater sense of control over your stress reaction.

Practice when you are not particularly distressed or anxious. Just like learning to ride a bike, you don't start in heavy traffic!

Where and When to Practice

Where: Do your relaxation exercise while sitting in a comfortable chair, lying on the bed, or lying on the floor on a comfortable mat.

When: Find a quiet time and place where you will be alone and won't be interrupted by family members, the phone, or the TV. Soft, relaxing music or a fan also help to block out noises that might distract you.

You're in Control

Remember, these exercises should help you learn ways of feeling more in control of your body and emotions.

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You are in control of practicing relaxation, so do it in a way that works for you. Most people really like how these exercises make them feel, but if you don't you can stop at any time. Keep your eyes open if that works for you, or close your eyes if you prefer.

It's possible, although not common, that you will become slightly more anxious or distressed as you try relaxing. If this happens to you, just open your eyes and re-orient yourself to your surroundings. Tell yourself:

- "I'm safe right now."
- "I am going to be ok."
- "Memories and thoughts cannot hurt me."
- "I'll get better at relaxation as I practice it."