

Brief Combination Techniques

In this chapter you will learn to:

- * Tailor relaxation techniques to fit your specific needs
- * Combine techniques for a more powerful effect

BACKGROUND

The relaxation exercises presented in this chapter are based on the work of many different therapists. They are creative blends of some of the techniques you've already learned. Learning several brief combination techniques can greatly benefit you for three reasons.

1. When you put two or more relaxation approaches together, the combination can have a *synergistic* effect. This means that the sum relaxation effect of the combined techniques is far greater than what you would achieve if you did each relaxation procedure individually. As you experiment with the material presented in this chapter, you'll learn which techniques are best at activating each other and combining for the most powerful effect.
2. The second reason that combining techniques is often more powerful than one technique by itself is that the sequence of the combination is structured to draw you deeper into the relaxation experience. Each technique builds progressively on the one before. For example, the relaxation you experience from visualizing a pleasant beach scene is more profound if you precede the visualization with some deep breathing. And if you follow the deep breathing and the beach scene with autogenic themes of heaviness and warmth, you have a sequence of techniques that builds one upon the other to activate a deeper relaxation response.
3. The third advantage to using the combination techniques presented here is their brevity. You can easily do any of these combined sequences during a ten-minute coffee break. Any time you have a few minutes to spare, they can help you center yourself and regain a sense of calmness.

The combination techniques presented here are merely suggestions. Although each one has been tested and proven useful, feel free to be inventive. Try your own unique combinations. Experiment with a different sequence. Because you are a unique person with unique needs and patterns of responses, it's important for you to add, delete, and modify until you have a brief combined relaxation sequence that really works for you.

SYMPTOM-RELIEF EFFECTIVENESS

The brief combination techniques presented here have been proven effective in the treatment of fight-or-flight symptoms and stress-induced physiological disorders. They are particularly helpful when your stress is work-related and requires brief but frequent booster sessions during the day to help you cope with mounting tensions.

TIME TO MASTER

If you have mastered the component techniques presented in earlier chapters, these combination approaches can be immediately and effectively applied. Otherwise, allow one to two weeks to use these combined approaches successfully.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Stretch and Relax

- A. While sitting in a chair, take a big stretch. Tighten your arms and pull them back so that you stretch your chest and shoulders. Stretch and tighten your legs at the same time by first pulling your toes up toward your knees and then pushing them out straight again.
- B. Place one hand on your abdomen, just above your natural waist (where a belt would be most comfortable). Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose into your abdomen. Allow your hand to be pushed out by your exhale as much as feels comfortable. Take four more deep breaths using the same procedure.
- C. Take hold of a pencil and suspend it by its point over a desk or table or the floor. Tell yourself that when you are deeply relaxed, the pencil will drop. The sound of the dropping pencil will be your signal to enter a healing five-minute trance. (If you prefer, you may omit the pencil and proceed with step C from here.) Close your eyes and say to yourself the key word or phrase that you've found most helpful in self-hypnosis. Tell

yourself you will become more and more relaxed with each number as you count backward from ten to zero. After the countdown, repeat to yourself these four phrases, over and over, in any order: "I am drifting deeper and deeper, deeper and deeper. . . . I am more and more drowsy, peaceful, and calm. . . . I am drifting and drowsy, drowsy and drifting. . . . I am drifting down, down, down into total relaxation." If, by this time, your pencil has not already dropped, let go of it deliberately and remind yourself that you will now enjoy five minutes of peaceful self-hypnosis.

- D. While in trance, visit your special place and enjoy the uniquely relaxing qualities of that environment. Really experience the sights, sounds, and sensations of your own special place. When it feels that you've been there long enough, count up from one to ten. Suggest to yourself that you are becoming more and more alert, refreshed, and wide awake as you count.

2. Abdominal Breathing and Imagination

This exercise combines the relaxing benefits of complete natural breathing with the curative value of positive autosuggestion.

- A. Lie down on the floor on a rug or blanket in a "dead body" pose.
- B. Place your hands gently on your solar plexus (the point where your ribs start to separate above your abdomen) and practice complete natural deep breathing for a few minutes.
- C. Imagine energy is rushing into your lungs with each incoming breath of air and being immediately stored in your solar plexus. Imagine that this energy is flowing out to all parts of your body with each exhalation. Form a mental picture of this energizing process.
- D. Continue doing this exercise on a daily basis for at least five to ten minutes a day.

3. Autogenic Breathing

- A. Begin by taking slow, deep abdominal breaths as described in step 1B above. Become aware of your growing feeling of relaxation as each deep breath expands your diaphragm.
- B. Visualize a beach. See the waves rolling up the sand, the seagulls wheeling overhead, a few puffs of fleecy clouds. Hear the roar of waves, and then the quiet. Hear the alternating roar, quiet, roar, quiet. Over the ocean sound you can hear the seagulls calling. Now feel the warm sand. Imagine it covering your body, warm and heavy. Really feel the weight of the sand on your arms and legs. Feel surrounded by warmth and comfort.

- C. While visualizing the sand, continue to breathe as deeply as feels comfortable. Notice the rhythm of your breath. As you breathe in, say the word "warm" to yourself. Try to feel the warmth of the sand around your body. As you breathe out, say the word "heavy." Experience the weight of the sand on your limbs. Continue your deep breathing, thinking "warm" as you inhale and "heavy" as you exhale. Continue for at least five minutes. (Note: If after a time you feel more comfortable shifting to shallower breathing, allow yourself to do so.)

4. I Am Grateful

This exercise is particularly helpful as the day is wearing on and your sense of stress and frustration is rising. It is also an excellent sequence for relaxing and putting yourself in a pleasant frame of mind before you drift off to sleep:

- A. Use the short form for progressive muscle relaxation outlined in chapter 4: (1) Curl fists, tighten biceps. (2) Wrinkle forehead and face like a walnut. (3) Arch back, take a deep breath. (4) Pull feet back, curl toes while tightening calves, thighs, buttocks.
- B. Reflect on the events of your day so far, and select three things for which you feel grateful. These don't have to be major events. For example, you may be grateful for the warm shower you took this morning, a coworker helping you with a difficult project, your child giving you a hug and telling you she loves you, a lovely sunrise, and so on. Take a moment to relive and enjoy these experiences.
- C. Continue to think back over your day. Recall three things you did that you feel good about. Remember, these don't have to be major feats. For example, you may feel good about saying no to something you really didn't want to do, taking time for yourself to exercise or relax, or being supportive to someone you like. Take a minute to reexperience those positive moments.

5. Deep Affirmation

- A. Put your hand over your abdomen and begin taking slow, deep abdominal breaths, as described in step 1B above.
- B. Close your eyes and continue to breathe deeply as you scan your body for tension. Start with your toes and move up your body. Notice any tension in your calves, thighs, and buttocks. Explore areas of tension in your back, abdomen, or chest muscles. Notice your shoulders and neck, your jaw, cheeks, and forehead. Check for tension in your biceps,

forearms, and hands. Whenever you discover a tense area, exaggerate the tension slightly so that you can become more aware of it. Notice exactly which muscles in your body are tense and then say to yourself, "I am tensing my [insert the name of the muscle you're working with]. I am hurting myself . . . I am creating tension in my body . . . I will let go of that tension starting now."

- C. Use the self-hypnosis exercise outlined in step 1C.
- D. Select an affirmation to use while in trance. The following list of suggested affirmations is reprinted with permission from *Visualization for Change* (1994) by Patrick Fanning.
 - I can relax at will.*
 - Tension is draining from my muscles.*
 - I'm filled with peace, calm, and serenity.*
 - I can turn my tension down like the volume on a radio.*
 - Relaxation floods my body like healing, golden light.*
 - I am in touch with my peaceful center.*
 - I can look inward and find peace.*
 - Relaxation is always within my grasp.*
- E. When you have relaxed long enough, count back up from one to ten. Suggest to yourself while you count that you are feeling more and more refreshed, alert, and wide awake.

6. The Tension Cutter

- A. Take four deep abdominal breaths as described in step 1B.
- B. Close your eyes. Visualize your tension by giving it a color and a shape. Now change the shape and color of your tension. Make it bigger or smaller, lighter or darker. Now see it moving farther and farther away from you. Watch it as it becomes smaller and smaller until it finally disappears from your awareness.
- C. Now imagine your body filled with lights. See red lights for tension spots and blue lights for relaxed areas. Imagine the lights changing from red to blue in all the tension spots of your body. Be aware of any physical sensation you experience while you change to the blue light of relaxation. See all the lights in your body as blue and see the color blue becoming darker and darker. Feel yourself relaxing more deeply with each darker shade of blue you experience.

- D. Now it's time for a minivacation. Here are two itineraries: pick one to enjoy or use them as a model for creating your own minivacation.

Vacation 1. Picture yourself in a forest. The light is clear and bright in places and dappled in others. As you take a long pleasant walk, you feel safe and comfortable. The air around you is cool and refreshing. You enjoy the bright spots of sunshine on the ground where sunlight filters down through the leaves. You are walking barefooted. The fallen leaves and moss feel soft and cool to your feet. You hear birdsongs and the soft rustle of wind through the trees. These sounds make you feel happy and comfortable. As you walk, your muscles feel looser and looser, heavier, and more relaxed. The forest carpet of leaves and moss feels so comfortable that you want to lie down on it and close your eyes to rest. Now you see a small stream. It is making a soft, bubbly noise. Next to the stream is a patch of tall, soft grass, lit and warmed by sunlight. It's a lovely place to rest and you sink down to your knees and roll gently over onto the soft, warm grass. You hear the bubbling stream, the birds' song, and the gentle wind. You are so deeply relaxed that every part of your body from your toes to the top of your head is loose and heavy.

Vacation 2. Picture yourself alone in a beach house with a view of the sea. The first rays of the morning sun light up the wall of your bedroom as you sink deeper into the warm, soft bed. You take a deep breath and notice how relaxed your muscles are. Outside you hear the sounds of seagulls and the rhythmic crashing of the waves. The waves roll in and out, in and out. Each wave makes you more and more deeply relaxed. In and out, in and out. You feel drowsy, heavy, and calm. You can feel the cool salt air coming through the open window and you roll over to see the sand and the waves and the blue sky. You take deep breaths of the air and your relaxation deepens with each breath. You feel safe and yet very free, unhurried, aware that the day ahead is full of possibilities.

7. Taking Control

- A. Get comfortable, close your eyes, and begin noticing your breathing. Try to notice each breath and nothing else. As you exhale, say to yourself the word "one." Keep saying "one" with each exhalation.
- B. When you feel sufficiently relaxed, turn your attention from your breathing to a situation you find stressful or difficult. See yourself handling that stressful situation confidently and successfully. See yourself saying and doing the appropriate thing to succeed. See yourself smiling, standing or sitting erectly. Now visualize yourself hesitating or making a small error, uncertain for a moment. But then you recover, you go on, confidently finishing the task, looking satisfied. You remind yourself, "I can handle this. I'm in control."

8. Accepting Yourself

- A. Use the body scanning procedure from chapter 2 to become aware of how you are feeling in your body right now and what stressors might be contributing to how you feel.
- B. Use abdominal breathing as described in step 1B to let go of the tension in your body and relax.
- C. When you feel relaxed, make these suggestions to yourself: "I let go of 'shoulds.' ... I accept myself with all my faults and weaknesses. ... I breathe, I feel, I do the best I can." Rewrite this mantra in any manner that feels more authentic or true for you. Anything will work, as long as it carries the basic message that you accept yourself.

We also recommend that you review and consider incorporating the following combination techniques from these other chapters into your daily routine:

1. Mindful Breath Counting from chapter 3
2. Cue-Controlled Relaxation from chapter 7
3. Creating Your Special Place from chapter 6

FURTHER READING

Fanning, P. 1994. *Visualization for Change*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.

RECORDINGS

The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook Audio Program Series CD is sold separately by New Harbinger Publications. This is a source of audio exercises that you can use on a daily basis. The series consists of: Applied Relaxation Training, Body Awareness and Imagination, Progressive Relaxation and Breathing, and Stress Inoculation.

Fanning, P., and M. McKay. 1997. *The Daily Relaxer Series*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.

Miller, E. 2003. *Letting Go of Stress* (Audio CD). Nevada City, CA: Emmett Miller. www.drmillier.com.

