Chapter 4.  
Feeling Tools: Controlling Anxiety and Frustration

Why is relaxation an important tool in treating depression?

Intense feelings of anxiety and/or anger often accompany depression. Many people report that increased anxiety and anger worsen negative thoughts, create significant physical tension and intensify any physical pain they are experiencing. We often hear people describe themselves as feeling "overwhelmed" by these emotions, unable to find a way to reduce their impact. It is also common for these feelings to be so intense that people find it hard to imagine a time when they were absent. Skills of relaxation can be another effective tool to break this vicious cycle and take control of these emotions.

How do we know that we are anxious or angry? Do the same types of situations bring on these intense feelings? Many people report patterns of emotional reactions to specific situations. Becoming aware of when these are experienced will help prepare clients to take control of them.

We also know we are tense or angry because of our physical symptoms. Is there tension in our body? Does our head hurt? Is breathing too quick? These physical symptoms are typical signs of anxiety or anger. These physical symptoms are called "danger signals." Spend a few moments talking with your client about their danger signals of anxiety and frustration.

Explain to clients that danger signals are the body's way of announcing that you must stop what you are doing to calm down and refocus your thoughts. When a danger signal arises, it is time to introduce a "stop sign," which is a behavior or a thought that will put the breaks on the negative feelings. Some examples of "stop signs" are taking a deep breath, leaving the room, turning the lights off for a moment, or even a combination of all of these things.

It is often very helpful to understand the sources of anxiety and types of danger signals experienced using a Tension Diary. The Tension Diary allows clients to record their most stressful times, least stressful times and their physical
symptoms of tension. On page 54 of the client manual, clients see the following example:

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**Eduardo** is a 69 year old Hispanic man who retired 1 year ago from a 40 year career in investment banking. He lives with his wife of 49 years in a home they have shared since they were first married. Eduardo reports good relationships with his wife, his 5 adult children, and his 19 grandchildren. He started therapy to help him with the depression and anxiety he has experienced for the past 6 months since his mother moved into his home from Mexico after she had a stroke. Eduardo reported that he had just started several new hobbies (both alone and with his wife) to keep him active in retirement. Eduardo is the full time caregiver for his mother, since his wife stills works out of the home during the day. He specifically reported to the therapist that he feels tremendous tension in responding to these caregiving duties, yet he is the only one of his mother's children who can care for her. He explains that his one brother recently died of heart disease, and his one sister lives in Europe with her family.

Eduardo requests that his first goal be to reduce his tension and anxiety. The therapist asks him to complete a Tension Diary for the week. Eduardo’s Tension Diary from Monday through Wednesday is illustrated:
**EDUARDO’S TENSION DIARY**

**Directions:** For each day, rate your average tension score. Indicate your least relaxed and most relaxed situations, as well as any physical symptoms that you experience.

Tension rating:  
1 = Least tense you have ever been  
10 = Most tense you have even been

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>MONDAY</th>
<th>TUESDAY</th>
<th>WEDNESDAY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average Score</strong></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>for the day</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Most Tense</strong></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Score</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>When &amp; Where?</strong></td>
<td>9:00 am</td>
<td>8:00pm</td>
<td>1:00pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>breakfast</td>
<td>livingroom</td>
<td>study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What was the situation?</strong></td>
<td>wife was frustrated with my mother</td>
<td>on the phone with my broker</td>
<td>doing taxes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Physical Signs</strong></td>
<td>head hurt</td>
<td>headache</td>
<td>quick breathing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i.e. headache,</td>
<td>back tense</td>
<td>overall tension</td>
<td>headache</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stomachache, restless</td>
<td>quick breathing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sleep</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Least Tense</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Score</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>When &amp; Where?</strong></td>
<td>12:00pm</td>
<td>2:00pm</td>
<td>3:00pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>restaurant</td>
<td>garden</td>
<td>car</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What was the situation?</strong></td>
<td>golf with friend</td>
<td>reading paper, but thinking of discussion with broker and financial situation</td>
<td>running errands- but stuck in traffic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Eduardo does experience variations in tension throughout the day, which is very common. He notices that headaches appear each day as a physical sign of tension. This information has helped him recognize "danger signals," as well as begin to learn his/her patterns of stressful situations. In addition, Eduardo noticed that when he is engaged in a few pleasant events, his tension decreased significantly.
Practice the Tension Diary

On page 57 in the client manual, there is an opportunity for clients to begin their familiarity with this form.
Relaxation Exercise

There are many effective methods of relaxation, but you should be somewhat cautious in selecting an exercise for older adults. It can be quite difficult for older adults with joint or muscular difficulties to engage in exercises requiring the physical tensing and releasing found in progressive muscle relaxation. Instead, it is recommended that exercises focusing on visual imagery be used. We use a brief, guided relaxation exercise that is quite effective with older people who are experiencing significant anxiety and frustration along with depression. This exercise is reproduced on the following pages. In order for clients to gauge whether relaxation is helpful, we suggest getting them in the habit of doing a pre and post tension rating using the scale below (pg 59 in the client manual).


1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
not tense so-so extremely tense

Talk with clients about what has contributed to this rating.
Why do I feel this way?
________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________
What danger signals am I experiencing now?
________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________

PRACTICE THE RELAXATION EXERCISE NOW

Often, clients expect their tension to decrease more than it does after their first few practices. Remind clients that the more relaxation is practiced, the more
relaxed they will feel immediately following the exercise. Also, with increased practice, there will be a decrease in the time it takes to reach a relaxed state. Some people report that their body and mind become completely relaxed by the first deep breath! Encourage the use of the Relaxation Practice Log to gauge progress.

**Relaxation on your own**

Relaxation can also be used to prepare clients for an upcoming stressful event. For example, if visits to a particular family member are stressful, encourage clients to spend a few moments in their "relaxation spot" prior to the visit. In addition, many of our clients start the day with relaxation exercises, even if they are not in a high stress moment. The effects of relaxation can be a nice way to start the day, or create a calm break to refocus throughout the day. Many people report that music enhances the benefits of relaxation. Discuss this possibility with your client to create a diverse relaxation program.

**RELAXATION: GENERAL PRINCIPLES:**

1. Notice the "danger signals" and introduce a "stop sign!"
2. Sit in a comfortable place, keeping arms and legs uncrossed.
3. Keep eyes closed and block out all external sounds.
4. Breathe very slowly, inhaling through the nose and exhaling through the mouth. Focus on breathing with a steady pace throughout the entire exercise.
5. When imagining a safe place, let all thoughts floating into your awareness float out quickly. This time is meant as a break from the demands of life and NOT a time to focus on responsibilities.
6. Set aside times when relaxation is a treat. Remember: Practice enhances the effect!
**RELAXATION PRACTICE LOG**

**Directions:** Rate your level of tension from "1," least tense to "10," most tense before and after the relaxation exercise. Record the time of day that you did the exercise and some comments regarding the prior stressful situation and whether the relaxation helped you. Do this each day.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>TIME</th>
<th>RELAXATION SCORE</th>
<th>COMMENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Before: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>After: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Before: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
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<td>After: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
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<td>Before: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
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<td>After: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
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<td>Before: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
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<td>After: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Before: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>After: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Anger Management**

Many older people experience intense anger or frustration associated with their depression. For example, a great deal of work has been done to help older people who are caring for an elderly relative or spouse with strategies to handle the many frustrating situations they experience. The steps involved in anger management are a consolidation of several different skills presented in this workbook, as well as work you may have already covered in therapy. These steps include:

1. Recognizing the situations that result in an emotional reaction of anger.
2. Recognizing the danger signals (i.e. How does the body feel?).
3. Engaging in an activity to physically calm down, such as relaxation, breathing slowly, or even exercise.
4. Using thinking tools to identify and modify the automatic thoughts that lead to intense anger and frustration.
5. Using assertiveness skills (to be covered later) if needed.
6. Rewards for managing these feelings.

On page 63 of the client manual, the following example is presented:

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Roberta is a caring for her husband of 40 years who has Alzheimer’s Disease. She has recently paid someone to come to her home for several hours each day so she can run errands and do some visiting with friends. Whenever she gets ready to leave the house, her husband follows her around, walking closely behind her, repeatedly asking where she’s going and when she will return. Roberta says that her husband’s repeated questions are an extreme source of stress for her. She reports that at these times, her body tenses, her breathing is difficult, her head begins to hurt, and she is near tears. She handles the situation by screaming at her husband and leaving quickly, but then she says that "my whole day is ruined because I cannot shake this tension."
Follow Roberta through the steps outlined above to see if she can reduce her anger.

Step 1: What situations are the most stressful?

**When my husband repeats questions over and over.**

Step 2: Danger Signals: How do I know that I am angry?

I feel like I can't breathe, my head hurts, and all of my muscles feel like rocks. All I want to do is escape!

Step 3: How do I calm down my danger signals?

I know that I need to practice relaxation, but the only place I can do it is in the car before I go anywhere. Sometimes I hide in the bathroom to take a few relaxing breaths. I would like to start a walking program again to get my muscles moving.

Step 4: Changing my “angry head set”: The Unhelpful Thought Diary.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stressful Event</th>
<th>Automatic Thoughts</th>
<th>Emotions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| My husband asks the same question over and over. | I am trapped! - 95%  
He's trying to make me crazy. - 85%  
I can never stop this! - 95% | frustration!! - 100% |
Adaptive thoughts:

Getting upset will not help me. He is not doing this on purpose, it is the disease. I deserve to enjoy my time alone. I will just take a few breaths, leave the house, and continue with my plans.

Current Emotions:

Frustration - 50%
Some hope - 45%

Step 5: Reward for managing emotions.

I asked my helper to come for an extra hour at the end of this week so I can go to the movies with my friend Estelle.

Pages 66-67 of the client manual provides a step by step exercise in managing frustration.