

# Using Relaxation Skills to Manage Stress & Tension





# What to Expect in this Session

## **Session Roadmap**

1. We will set an agenda for the session.
2. How are you doing? We will complete a quick mood “check-in.”
3. We will review the previous session’s assignment and any other ongoing homework or skills you are using.

## **Developing New Skills – Using Relaxation Skills**

4. We will discuss stress and tension and introduce two relaxation skills that can be applied in your life.
5. We will review how Dave/Danielle used the relaxation skills session to address stress and tension.
6. We will review information about the relaxation skill you choose and then practice the skill in session.
7. We will develop an action plan to help you meet your goals.



# Rate your Mood

Over the last 2 weeks, how often have you been bothered by any of the

	Not at all	Several Days	More than half the	Nearly every-
1. Little interest or pleasure in doing things.	0	1	2	3
2. Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless.	0	1	2	3
3. Trouble falling asleep, staying asleep, or sleeping too much.	0	1	2	3
4. Feeling tired or having little energy.	0	1	2	3
5. Poor appetite or overeating.	0	1	2	3
6. Feeling bad about yourself—or that you are a failure or have let yourself or your family down.	0	1	2	3
7. Trouble concentrating on things, such as reading the newspaper or watching television.	0	1	2	3
8. Moving or speaking so slowly that other people could have noticed. Or the opposite—being so fidgety or restless that you have been moving around more than usual.	0	1	2	3
9. Thoughts that you would be better off dead, or of hurting yourself in some way.	0	1	2	3

How difficult have these problems made it for you to do your work, take care of things at home, or get along with other people?

Not Difficult at All	Somewhat Difficult	Very Difficult	Extremely Difficult
0	1	2	3

# Stress & Tension in Your Life

We all experience stress and tension at times. This is an important and natural response to the demands in our lives. If we didn't feel stress or tension, then we would not feel motivated to deal with these demands.

Most of us like some challenges! However, too much stress can cause problems and impact our health and well-being.

You may experience stress and tension in a number of ways.

Check any of these signs that look familiar to you.

## Common sensations of stress and tension

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Muscle tension                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Heart pounding |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty concentrating        | <input type="checkbox"/> Irritability   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Feelings of worry or fear       | <input type="checkbox"/> Sweaty palms   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Thinking the worst might happen | <input type="checkbox"/> Fatigue        |

## What are sources of stress and tension in your life?

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## How has this impacted your life?

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# Taking Control with Relaxation Skills

The purpose of relaxation exercises is for you to gain skills to guide your mind and body away from stress and tension and into a more relaxed state.



Relaxation and tension are incompatible states that cannot occur together.

If you are relaxed, then you are not tense. If you are tense, then you are not relaxed.

Here are two simple, effective skills to help you gain control over your stress and tension.



## Deep Breathing

- Learn how to breathe optimally for oxygen “transfer” to reduce bodily tension and lower your heartbeat.

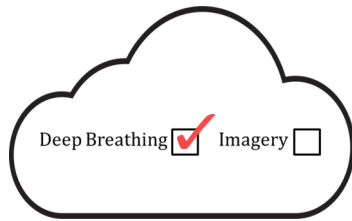


## Imagery

- Learn to use vivid, soothing mental imagery to focus your attention away from unhelpful thoughts and feelings.

Which skill would be the most helpful to you?

# How Dave Uses Deep Breathing



Dave starts feeling anxious while waiting in line at the bank. He needs to talk to the teller about his overdrawn account balance and see if he can reverse some incorrect charges.



- *Worried.*
- *Feels tightness in his stomach.*
- *Feels stressed out about finances.*



- *Snaps at the teller when he gets to the counter, because he feels so stressed out.*
- *Sometimes he leaves the line altogether to avoid talking to the teller.*



- *"I am going up to the teller, and she'll tell me there is no money in my account."*
- *"The teller is going to think I am a low-life."*
- *"I have no control over my finances."*

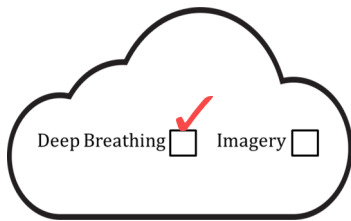
**Dave uses his deep breathing skills from the session:**



1. Dave realizes his breathing is "portable;" therefore, he can practice it in line or anywhere else he starts feeling stressed.
2. By focusing on his breath, Dave stops thinking about his anxious thoughts, and his stomach tightness loosens. He is able to remain waiting in line.
3. By the time Dave gets to the teller, he feels more in control and is able to explain his situation calmly to the bank teller.



# How Danielle Uses Deep Breathing



**Danielle starts feeling anxious when she checks her mail and sees four bills that need to be paid.**



## How Danielle Feels

- *Nervous; her body feels tense*
- *Flustered*
- *Anxious; her stomach feels tight*

## What Danielle is Doing

- *Stops going through her mail or looking at other bills.*
- *Distracts herself with TV or comforting foods.*
- *Snaps at her daughter when she comes home from school.*

## What Danielle Thinks

- *"This is too much money to pay, I won't be able to pay it."*
- *"I have no control over my finances."*
- *"I'm going to let my daughter down."*

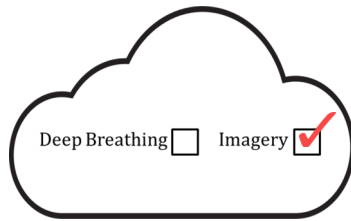
**Danielle uses her deep breathing skills from the session:**



1. She realizes her breathing is "portable;" therefore, she can practice it anywhere in her home.
2. By focusing on her breath, Danielle shifts focus from her worrying thoughts and notices her body relaxing. With slowed breathing, she becomes less flustered.
3. Regaining control of her anxiety, she decides to look at her bank account and begin problem solving the bills she needs to pay.



# How Dave Uses Imagery



**Dave wakes up, and the first thing he notices that morning is his chronic pain.**



- *Low mood.*
- *Frustrated.*
- *Preoccupied with his pain.*



- *Avoids physical activity when he is in pain.*
- *Stays in bed and watches TV to try and distract himself.*



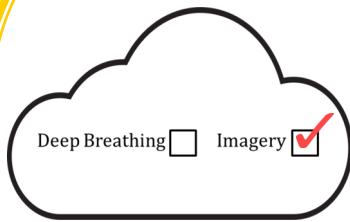
- *"I am in too much pain to do anything productive."*
- *"I have no control over my pain—It is taking over my life."*

**Dave decides to use his imagery skills from the session:**



1. The imagery exercise helps him relax and distracts him from his pain.  
*Dave has noticed that when his stress decreases, his muscles relax, and his pain often decreases*
2. This exercise helps him shift his way of thinking.  
*He realizes he could make some positive changes to manage some of his pain.*
3. Dave finds that, with regular practice, this technique improves his overall sense of well-being.

# How Danielle Uses Imagery



Danielle tries to go to sleep, but cannot fall asleep because she has been worrying all day and has a headache.



- *Helpless*
- *Frustrated*
- *Discouraged*



- *Stays in bed and looks at her phone apps.*
- *Tosses and turns - tries to get comfortable*



- *"I am worried that this is going to ruin my day tomorrow."*
- *"I can't rest. I can't catch a break. I'm stuck."*

**Danielle decides to use her imagery skills from the session:**

1. The imagery exercise distracts her from her headache and helps her relax.

*Danielle has noticed that when she focuses on a relaxing image, her mind relaxes and her thoughts slow down.*



2. This exercise helps her shift her way of thinking.

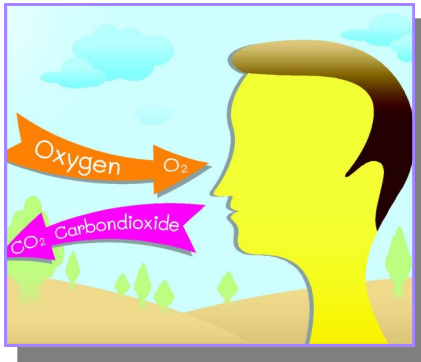
*She realizes that she can think more clearly - there are ways she can cope with her worrying.*

3. Danielle finds that, with regular practice, this technique improves her overall sense of well-being.

# Using Deep Breathing to Reduce Stress & Tension

## Why is deep breathing used?

There needs to be a balance between oxygen and carbon dioxide in the blood for the body to run efficiently. This balance is maintained through how fast and how deeply we breathe.



Rapid and shallow breathing disrupts the oxygen-carbon dioxide balance and can cause many of the physical sensations that accompany stress and tension.

## *One thing that can help is deep breathing.*

- Changing the rate and way you breathe can make your entire body feel more relaxed and function more effectively.
- Taking a deep, full breath can produce a feeling of calmness and relaxation by increasing your oxygen-rich blood flow.
- Deep breathing can help you start to form good habits for reacting to stressful situations.



# How to Practice Deep Breathing

Take notice of your breathing. Is your chest or stomach moving? You most likely breathe more from the **chest** than the stomach. We want to teach you to breathe more with your **stomach** and diaphragm rather than your chest.

## How to Deep Breathe:

1. Place one hand on your abdomen, with your little finger about one inch above your navel, and place the other hand on your chest. If you are lying down, you can place a book on your stomach instead of your hands.
2. **Inhale “into your stomach,”** through your nose, pausing naturally before exhaling. You should see the hand or book on your stomach move more than your chest.
3. **Exhale** gradually through your lips, by tightening your stomach muscles and pausing naturally before inhaling again.
4. Take slow, even, deep breaths. Breathe in and out at a comfortable rate. Do not pause at the top of each breath.



## Other Resources

*You can view an animated video demonstrating how to perform deep breathing at this web address:*

<https://youtu.be/YdsipKCACac>

# Instructions for Practice Exercises

Changing your experience of stress is like learning a new skill - *it gets easier with practice!*

- Practice regularly. Try three five-minute sessions a day.
- Once you are comfortable with deep breathing, try the following:
  1. Inhale at a normal speed.
  2. Exhale for four seconds.
  3. Pause for four seconds, then repeat.
- Focus on the count during your exhalations, and pause before inhaling again. This will activate your body's relaxation response!
- Start by practicing only in non-stressful situations. Once you feel comfortable with it, you can use deep breathing in stressful situations.
- Increase awareness of stress! Identify stressful situations and write down feelings, physical signs, thoughts, and behaviors associated with those situations. This will help you be aware of when you can use deep breathing skills to help relax.
- Deep breathing can be done anytime, such as while sitting in traffic or waiting in line at the grocery store.



# Using Imagery to Reduce Stress & Tension

## What is imagery?

Imagery is a simple process that uses your imagination to communicate with your body. To your body, images and experiences created in your mind can be as real as actual events. Your body will react as though the experience is happening. It seems the body may not know the difference between an actual event and a thought!

## Why is imagery used?

*You can take advantage of this by using your imagination to visualize pleasant experiences.* Using imagery this way can ease stress and promote an overall sense of well-being.

Think about times when you have daydreamed. We have all daydreamed about pleasant things that made us feel better.

Of course, the opposite is also true! The difference is that daydreaming usually happens “on accident.” Imagery is used on purpose with a specific goal in mind; to feel better!



Imagery, therefore, can be a powerful tool when used correctly.



# How To Practice Using Imagery

1. Find a quiet space where you can either sit or lie down.
2. Start with a quick check-in on what you are thinking and how you feel in your body.
3. Practice deep breathing for a few minutes if you wish (see deep breathing instructions).
4. Imagine going to a place where you feel safe, peaceful, and calm. This place can be a real place or somewhere you invent yourself.
5. Take some time to develop the image of this place in your mind so you can fully experience all of the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and textures.
6. Practice relaxing as you use all of your senses, and imagine being in this special place.

## Example:

Imagine a glass of lemonade. The glass feels icy and cold; visualize the color of the lemonade, think of the fresh citrus smell, think of how it *tastes*.

You probably are salivating thinking of this juice, aren't you?

Try to create a pleasant, positive image that fits your preferences and has meaning to you.





## A Generic Example:

Find a comfortable position, either sitting comfortably in a chair or lying down. Close your eyes and take several long, deep breaths.



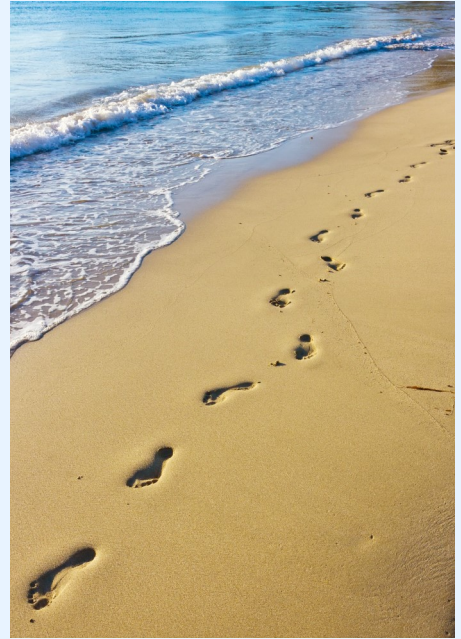
Once your whole body feels relaxed, travel to your favorite place... it can be any time period or any place. This place is calm and safe... there are no worries here.... Look around this place. What do you see? Do you hear the sounds around you? What are some of the sounds you hear in this place you are imagining? How does this special place smell? Walk around a little and take in all of the wonderful sights.... Feel the air around you and relax.... The air is fresh and it's easy to breathe here. Pay attention to how your body feels.... Say to yourself, "I am totally relaxed... without worries... all of the tension has drained away from my body." Take a moment to fully experience your favorite place. Notice the sounds, sights, and smells, and how it feels to be in this very special place. Remember that you can visit this place as often as you want and that it is wonderful. Say to yourself, "I am relaxed here... this place is special and makes me feel at peace."

When you are done with your visit to this special place, open your eyes, and stay in your comfortable position. Continue to breathe smoothly, in a relaxed and rhythmic fashion. Take as long as you want to enjoy and relax. You feel at ease knowing your special place is always available to you; and you find that you feel relaxed, even after you leave.



## Beach Example

Imagine yourself walking down a sandy beach. The sand is white and warm between your toes. You are looking out over the calm, blue water. The waves are gently lapping at the shore. You feel the pleasant warmth of the sun on your skin... it's a perfectly comfortable temperature outside. Breathe in deeply. There is a gentle breeze, and the sun is shining. Big, cotton-like clouds drift by as you hear sea gulls in the distance. You taste traces of salt on your lips. You are completely relaxed... there are no worries on this beach. There is nothing to



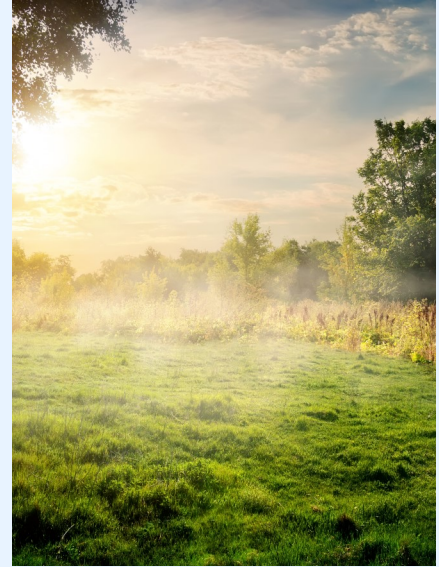
distract you from feeling tranquil. Worries drift away. Notice the sounds, the sights, the smells, and how it feels to be in this very special place.

Feel the sand under your feet... you decide to stretch out on the warm, fine, white sand... breathe deeply... feel the warm air. Your body is completely relaxed and you have an overall feeling of warmth and comfort. You look up at the clouds passing by slowly across the beautiful blue sky. You are feeling rejuvenated and completely at peace. Remember that you can visit this place as often as you want and that it is wonderful. Say to yourself, "I am relaxed here... this place is special and makes me feel peaceful and content."

When you are done with your visit, open your eyes and stay in your comfortable position. Continue to breathe smoothly, in a relaxed and rhythmic fashion, and take as long as you want to enjoy and relax. You feel at ease knowing your special place is always available to you; and you find that you feel relaxed, even after you leave.

## Meadows Example

Imagine yourself walking through a lovely meadow. The breeze feels pleasant against your skin. You are looking out over the calm, beautiful green grass. The blades of grass are gently swaying in the breeze. You feel the pleasant warmth of the sun on your skin... it's a perfectly comfortable temperature outside. Breathe in deeply. There is a gentle breeze, and the sun is shining. Big, cotton-like clouds drift by as you hear birds in the distance. You hear the wind blow gently through the trees. You taste the sweet summer air on your lips. You are completely relaxed... there are no worries in this meadow. There is nothing to distract you from feeling tranquil. Worries drift away. Notice the sounds, sights, and smells, and how it feels to be in this very special place.



Feel the cool grass under your feet... you decide to stretch out on the soft, cushiony grass... breathe deeply... feel the air enter your lungs slowly and deeply. Your body is completely relaxed, and you have an overall feeling of warmth and comfort. You look up at the clouds passing by slowly across the beautiful blue sky. You are feeling rejuvenated and completely at peace. Remember that you can visit this place as often as you want and that it is wonderful. Say to yourself, "I am relaxed here... this place is special and makes me feel peaceful and content."

When you are done with your visit, open your eyes and stay in your comfortable position. Continue to breathe smoothly, in a relaxed and rhythmic fashion; take as long as you want to enjoy and relax. You feel at ease knowing your special place is always available to you; and you find that you feel relaxed, even after you leave.

# Instructions for Practice Exercises

- Changing your experience of stress is like learning a new skill - it gets easier with practice!
- Practice makes perfect! Make sure you find several times a day to apply this technique. Practice for 10-15 minutes at a time in non-stressful situations. Once you feel comfortable with it, then you can use imagery in stressful situations.
- When ready to practice, choose a comfortable position, close your eyes, and give yourself permission to relax.
- Some people find using imagery before going to bed and first thing in the morning to be helpful.
- Remember, when using imagery, to use a scene that incorporates all of your senses and make it as elaborate and realistic as you can.
- You will find that, after practice, imagery will become a powerful tool to help you feel better.





# Action Plan

**The specific goal or activity I plan to work on:**

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**Timeline for completing goal:**

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**Steps to help me accomplish my goal:**

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**Possible barriers and ways to overcome them:**

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**How important is this goal to you?**

Not Very Important 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very Important

**How likely are you to complete these steps?**

Not Very Likely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very Likely

**Tracking your progress:**

What progress did you make towards your goal this week?

☐ Exceeded ☐ Met ☐ Partially Met ☐ Did Not Attempt

What went well?

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What challenges came up?

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# Action Plan

## Next Steps

- ☐ Option 1: **Continue** with your plan as is—keep doing what you
- ☐ Option 2: **Modify** your plan to better meet your needs.
- ☐ Option 3: **Use a different skill** that better meets your needs.

### Next Steps—Notes

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## Other Skills

### Questions to think about:

- What other skills are you using?
- Are these skills working for you?
- Do you see any changes needed for these skills?

### Next Steps— Plans to use these skills

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# Additional Resources

## Deep Breathing Mobile App

### **Breathe2Relax:**

Below is a link to a free guided-deep breathing app called “Breathe2relax.” This app will adjust to your particular breathing pattern, and then gradually train you to take slower, deeper breaths. Practice and get comfortable with the basic deep breathing technique first. Then, you can use Breathe2Relax to maximize your results:

<http://t2health.dcoe.mil/apps/breathe2relax>

If you would like more information on how to use Breathe2Relax, please view the following instructional video:

<https://youtu.be/AEZ1dvZuJYc>

