STRESS LESS:
Relaxation Enhancement Group Veteran Manual

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BEFORE YOU BEGIN:

Purpose:

The purpose of the Stress Less Manual is to teach you relaxation techniques and skills that will help you to de-stress and reduce anxiety in the short-term.

Using these materials:

In addition to being used to support a group-based treatment with a therapist, this manual can serve as a self-help resource that includes helping you to identify reasons to stress less, and resources for reducing anxiety.

How this treatment can help you:

These activities will help you to alleviate anxiety in the short run and are good coping strategies for acute anxiety.

How this treatment cannot help:

You should consider talking to a therapist about longer term solutions for anxiety. These may include evidence-based psychotherapies for PTSD and other anxiety disorders that can reduce or eliminate anxiety in the long term.

EXPECTATIONS/GROUP RULES:

- All group members agree to **respect the confidentiality** of the group. **"What happens in group stays in group."** This will help group members feel safe to discuss personal issues if they desire to do so.

- **Be respectful of one another.** Group members must feel physically and emotionally safe if progress is to be made. Group members 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."

- **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.

- To maximize what you get out of the group, **attend all sessions**. Call in advance if for any reason you cannot attend.

- **Silence your cell phones** before each group session.

SESSION 1

STRESS

How do you define stress?

_____

_____

Is it possible to Stress Less? **YES**

Why is it important to me to manage stress?

_____

_____

If our body is an engine...
that idles on high and we were able to reduce the idle of our engine, even for a few minutes of every day, what would happen?

Could it run more efficiently?

Would it last longer?

The short and long of it

Consequences	Short Term	Long Term
Physical		
Emotional		
Behavioral		

SUDS: Subjective Units of Distress Scale

Subjective = Personal, Your own

Units = Comparison

Distress = Upset

Scale = Measurement; a way to communicate

What is the SUDS?
This is a way for you to communicate with yourself and others about how you are feeling.

Saying "I am a 50/100" is more specific and tells yourself and others more than saying "I feel ok."

From 0 to 100

100 = The most distress you have EVER felt (total panic/worst mood).

90

80

70

60 = Extremely upset (furious/terrified/very sad); Hard to control emotions.

50 = Mid point

40 = Some Distress (irritated/ bummed); Emotions are under control.

30

20

10

0 = No distress at all. As relaxed as you have ever been.

Calm Breathing

The tools taught in this group will help you reduce your stress reaction.

Calm breathing is an important tool that can be used on its own to decrease anxiety in the short term and help with symptoms related to anxiety.

The Purpose:

Slow down breathing.

With practice, decrease situational anxiety.

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Choose a word that you relate to being calm or at peace.
2. Take a *normal* breath in through your nose with your mouth closed.
3. Exhale slowly with your mouth closed. On exhaling, think your soothing word (_____) very slowly.
4. Count slowly to 4 — then take another breath in this manner.

How can relaxation help me?

Anxiety is a **learned** response.

Relaxation is a **skill**.

To learn this skill, **practice** is required.

During relaxation, it is normal to experience changes in your mood. You may also notice a difference in the way your body feels.

The goal of relaxation: Feeling calm while you are **awake**.

Assignment #1

1. ***Practice calm breathing.***

   Practice calm breathing several times a day. Take 10 to 15 breaths each time you practice. Remember, the more you practice, the better this new coping skill works!

   Refer to Track 1: Introduction and Relaxed Breathing under "Other Resources" for audio recordings by Harry S. Truman Memorial Veterans' Hospital (page 17).

2. ***Complete the Relaxation Log (on wallet card).***

3. ***Be aware of SUDS before and after practice.***

SESSION 2

Your Stress I.D.

What are the warning signs that let you know you are becoming stressed?

Your physical signs of stress:

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

Your emotional signs of stress:

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

Deep Relaxation

Deep Relaxation Decreases:

- Heart Rate
- How Fast you Breathe
- Blood Pressure
- Muscle Tension
- Oxygen Use

Why Practice?

Regular practice of muscle relaxation for 20-30 minutes a day can help you learn how to use these relaxation skills no matter where you are.

What does this mean?

Your body will relearn how to relax, so that it feels more relaxed all the time.

Benefits

- Reduce anxiety in the short term.
- Prevent other issues from piling up.
- Give you increased energy.
- Improve your ability to concentrate.
- Help you fall asleep.
- Prevent physical problems.
- May increase self-confidence.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

WHY? When people feel anxious or frightened, they get stirred up inside. For example, they may begin to sweat. Their heart might race. Breathing may get faster. People may also experience muscle tension. This tension will, in turn, lead them to become more anxious.

GOAL: The goal of relaxation is to help you become more aware of this tension when it happens so you can reduce it as fast as possible.

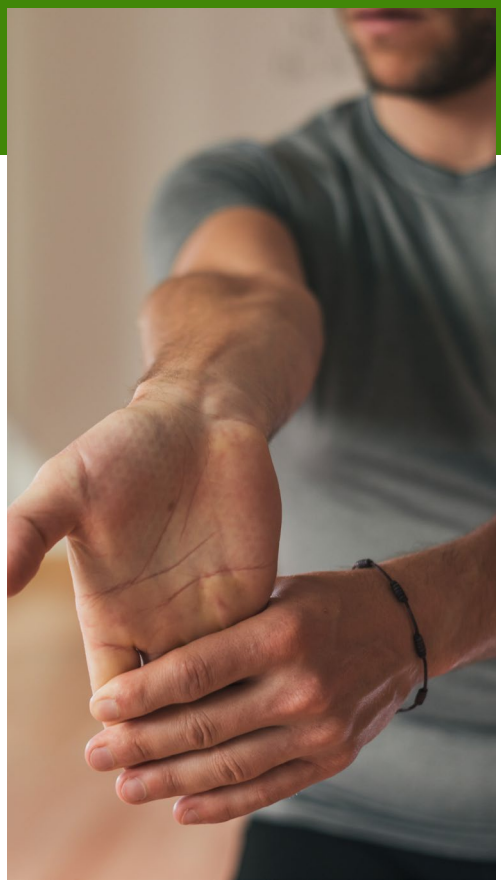
HOW? By tensing your muscles and relaxing them you will begin to notice how different it feels when you start feeling more stressed.

PRACTICE!

Before you begin:
Make sure you are in a quiet place.
Turn down the lights, but do not turn them off.
Sit upright in a comfortable chair.

Review:

- Tense each set of muscles twice.
- Tighten up your muscles at 50% - don't strain.
- Don't tighten any muscles where you have pain.
- Keep your muscles tight, tensing your muscle for 10 seconds.
- Relax your muscles for 30 seconds after tensing them twice.



Tension Groups

- Clench your fists.
- Bend your hands backward at the wrists.
- Flex your biceps muscles.
- Push your 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 toes away from your body.
- Stretch out your left leg, and point toes away from your body.
- Curl up your toes in your shoes.

Assignment #2

1. ***Practice Progressive Muscle Relaxation.***

   Practice at home by following the YouTube video by Mark Connelly, listed on the reference page (page 17).

   You will have to set aside 15 minutes for this exercise, but it is a very effective stress-management strategy.

2. ***Continue Relaxation Log.***

Roadblocks

I don't have the time to practice.

- Put practice relaxation sessions at the top of your "to do list" every day.
- Remind yourself that learning to relax will help you feel better.
- Remind yourself why you came in for help in the first place (you were stressed out) and what you hope to change (to stress less).

This is slow and boring.

- That is because you feel anxious and want to feel better now. It is good for you to slow down, and it gets easier with practice.

There is no place to relax at home.

- Talk to your family about why you need quiet time. Share your handouts with them so they can understand how important this quiet time is to your recovery.
- Ask them to help you find a quiet place and not to bother you while you are practicing.

I feel more anxious when I relax.

- This is normal...learning to relax takes practice. Shorten the time you spend relaxing, and little by little work up to 20 or 30 minutes.
- I just don't have the drive to do it.
- With practice you will start feeling less anxious. Feeling better will make you feel more like practicing. In the meantime, remember to act "as if" you feel like doing it.

SESSION 3

UNDERSTANDING ANXIETY

Where does anxiety come from?
Anxiety is an extreme change 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, this can start to happen in situations you think might be dangerous, whether or not there is actual danger.

Avoidance. Avoidance is a **learned** behavior. Certain conditions (for example, people, places, things, thoughts) make you anxious. You learn to connect anxiety with that condition. When you avoid that condition, your anxiety decreases at that moment, and you "learn" that avoiding the situation reduces your anxiety in the **short term**. This is how avoidance develops. In the short run, it is rewarding to avoid facing things that cause you anxiety.

However, in the long run, avoidance will increase your overall anxiety.

Thoughts. What you say to yourself can create and fan the flames of anxiety. Much anxiety is created by thoughts beginning with, "What if..." because this kind of thinking makes you expect the worse.

Bad Habits. Stimulants such as caffeine and nicotine mimic the feeling of anxiety because of the effect they have on your body. Most people get used to these substances and do not recognize how caffeine and nicotine affects their anxiety level...until they stop using them.

Positive Coping Strategies for Stress

PHYSICAL & LIFESTYLE	SPIRITUALITY & ATTITUDE	EMOTIONAL	COGNITIVE/ MENTAL
• Abdominal breathing • Relaxation techniques • Regular exercise • Low-stress diet • Downtime • Time management • Sleep habits	• Working toward goals • Positive philosophy • Religious commitment	• Social support • Self-nurturing • Good communication • Assertiveness • Recreational activities • Humor	• Countering negative thoughts • Distraction • Acceptance • Tolerance

Guided Imagery

- Guided imagery is a way of deliberately using an image to change how you feel, how you behave, and what goes on in your body.
- Guided imagery is used by athletes to help them perform better. It is also used to treat many physical and mental problems.
- Guided imagery is used to treat anxiety by placing you in a state of deep relaxation. Then you learn to create a picture in your mind that improves 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?

- Upcoming difficult situations.
- Something you have been avoiding.
- An important event.
- _____
- _____

PRACTICE!

Before you begin:

1. Get into a comfortable position, with your head and neck supported.
2. Be sure that where you are is quiet and distraction free.
3. Know the situation you will be creating in your mind.

Steps:

First, we will use sunlight meditation to achieve a state of deep relaxation.

Then, we will use guided imagery tools to improve self-confidence.

Assignment # 3

1. ***Practice the relaxation techniques learned in session as often as possible but at least twice over this week.***
2. ***Complete the Relaxation Log.***

SESSION 4

Grounding Techniques

What is grounding?

- Centering
- Looking outward
- Distraction
- Healthy detachment

What does it do?

Grounding helps you Shift from negative feelings and thoughts. Some people think of it like changing the channel on a television—when you change the channel, you get a different show.

- Grounding can be done **anytime** and **anywhere**.
- Use it whenever you are faced with a trigger, become very angry, disconnect, or have a lot of emotional pain (SUDS = 80 +).

3 TYPES OF GROUNDING

1. **Mental**: Focusing your mind.
2. **Physical**: Focusing your senses.
3. **Soothing**: Talking to yourself in a very kind way.

You may find that one of these is more helpful to you than others; or you may choose to use all three.

MENTAL GROUNDING:

- Play categories with yourself.
- Describe your environment in detail.
- Describe an activity in detail.
- 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 different objects around you.
- 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.
- Think of favorites or something to look forward to next week.
- Picture people you care about.
- Remember a safe place.
- Say a coping statement: “I can handle this. This feeling will pass.”

MAKING IT WORK

- Practice as often as possible.
- Practice faster.
- Try grounding for a LONG time.
- Make an index card.
- Prepare in advance.
- Start grounding early in the negative mood cycle.
- Think about why grounding works.
- Don’t give up!

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 this manual and refer back to it, so you can review what you have learned in Stress Management.

Thank you for attending the Stress Less group—we have enjoyed working with you.

OTHER 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

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

- 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