Why I Still Teach Deep Breathing

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Panic Attacks

WORKBOOK

A Guided Program for
Beating the Panic Trick

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Deep Breathing in the Treatment of Anxiety

• Dysfunctional breathing a strong component of most anxiety disorders
• Overlap between panic symptoms and hyperventilation
• Relaxation methods typically have breathing at their core
• Goldfried survey of CBT clinicians
  – Therapist experience correlates with panic treatment outcome and use of breathing
The Scientific Argument

• Some studies suggest that breathing instruction either
  – Adds little or no benefit;
  – May impede progress;
  – Adds less than some other component
• Not an open and shut case
• The key question is how breathing instruction can be used
The Evolution of Anxiety Treatment

• Anxiety Treatment has evolved away from reliance on coping to exposure
• Treatment reverses the anti-anxiety processes of protection and avoidance
• Exposure, good; safety behaviors, bad
• Studies which fault breathing instruction often use breathing instruction which emphasizes control and reduction of fear
Coping Technique or Exposure Tool?

• Can we use breathing instruction in a way that emphasizes exposure and acceptance rather than control?

• Can it be done in a sufficiently brief and organic way to avoid having to trade off other treatment elements?

• And also helps them to be better breathers?
Introducing Belly Breathing to a Client

• What do you do when you can’t catch your breath?
• Show me your deep breath
• Mention the Rule of Opposites
• Now we have a specific breathing technique, and a powerful general rule of thumb that will both promote exposure
• We can use breathing to induce panic symptoms as well as calm them
The Rule of Opposites

• My gut instinct of how to respond to high anxiety is dead wrong
• It’s wrong because it’s based on treating panic as danger, rather than discomfort
• What’s useful for discomfort is the opposite of what’s useful for danger
• When you panic, do the opposite of your gut instinct
Common Applications of the Rule of Opposites

- Death grip on wheel
- Hold breath
- Resist the fear
- Tense the body
- Stand still
- Hide the fear
- Be a wallflower
- Flee
- Check repeatedly
- Hold the wheel lightly
- Belly breathing
- Accept the fear
- Relax the body
- Use your body
- Acknowledge fear
- Introduce self
- Hang out
- Trust experience
Introducing the Anxiety Trick

- You experience Discomfort, but treat it like Danger
- For Danger: Fight, Flight, Freeze
- For Discomfort: Float, or chill out
- This has power, because what’s good for Danger is the Opposite of what’s good for Discomfort
- The Anxiety Trick leads you to react in ways that make the problem worse rather than better
- Undoing the Trick is the main task
References

