

# How to Help Your Patients Overcome Anxiety with Mindfulness

When to Use Relaxation and Calming Practices

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## How to Help Your Patients Overcome Anxiety with Mindfulness:

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## When to Use Relaxation and Calming Practices

“Mindfulness practices are not designed to get rid of fear, but rather to help us to be able to be with and fully experience our fear as well as the rest of life’s emotions.”

**Dr. Siegel:** I’ve been emphasizing throughout this course that mindfulness practices are not relaxation training.

They are not designed to get rid of fear, but rather they are designed to help us to be able to be with and fully experience our fear as well as the rest of life’s emotions.

For some folks, they are so overwhelmed, so debilitated by their anxiety, that it can be actually helpful to have some kind of calming

technique before they open to the experience of fear more broadly.

It becomes very tricky using these in treatments because they become so readily subject to what we call escape avoidance learning.

Escape avoidance learning is what sends people into agoraphobia. It’s where you go into the supermarket, you start to feel anxious, and you start to panic. You run out of the supermarket, get into the parking lot and, “Phew,” that feels a little bit better.

Then, the next time you go into the supermarket, you’re going to become anxious, just fearful that the same thing will happen again and you go out to the parking lot even more quickly.

After a little while, you start avoiding supermarkets, then post offices and everything else in life.

The problem with relaxation training or the use of benzodiazepines – or for that matter drinking (alcohol) – as a way to cope with anxiety is that it trains us to feel and think that anxiety is the problem and we wind up getting negative reinforcement – the relief from punishment that we get when we have the drink, take the benzodiazepines or go out into the parking lot.

This negative reinforcement simply perpetuates the avoidance pattern and we wind up with a rather constricted life – we don’t want to go here unless we need to.

“The problem with relaxation training as a way to cope with anxiety is that it trains us to feel and think that anxiety is the problem.”

That said, there are times in which people are so overwhelmed that it is helpful to give them some tools that they can use to deliberately lower their level of anxiety – it's at a level they can work with it.

We might use medicines for this – certainly the SSRIs can be useful in this way.

If you take an SSRI or an SNRI, over time, and these are the commonly prescribed antidepressants, what happens is we have a little bit less psychophysiological arousal – a little less adrenaline coursing through the veins and a little more calmness.

Benzodiazepines are trickier – they encourage escape avoidance learning. Their effect is virtually immediate - maybe 20 minutes or half an hour.

I think benzodiazepines can be useful in the pocket for people – carrying them around, having them available, and knowing that if (and I quote) “get into trouble that I can't bear, I could always take it,” but then committing oneself to not actually taking it.

In this case, a benzodiazepine can be helpful. It becomes like a little bit of a talisman for folks.

Then there are the various relaxation training kinds of things. Often, when people begin taking a course in mindfulness-based stress reduction as I mentioned before, the name throws people off. They think, “The idea is I'm going to feel calmer.”

If you have that as your goal, you're more likely to get caught in resisting anxiety and as a result, get caught in an anxiety disorder.

***“How might we use these techniques or combine mindfulness practice with these relaxation techniques?”***

That said, again, sometimes there's a role for this.

How might we use these techniques or combine mindfulness practice with these relaxation techniques?

One that is quite simple is to do a breath-focus meditation like the ones that you can find at [mindfulness-solution.com](http://mindfulness-solution.com), only to do it with deeper and slower breaths so that you are combining deliberate diaphragmatic breathing with a mindfulness practice.

Again, it's tricky because it's so easy for people to think, “The whole idea is to relax,” and that's not ultimately the idea, but this might be helpful at some point to get into a midrange where you can then open more fully to the experience.

All you do is put your hand on the belly, breathe in slowly and deeply, and then breathe out slowly and deeply.

You want to feel the rising and falling sensations in the belly, using your hand as a kind of support for that.

Here's something else that helps – it's based on our instinctual wiring – “If I'm frightened, what does that sound like in terms of breathing?” “Agh!” If I'm relaxed, what does that sound like? “Ahhhhhh.”

We can capitalize on the fact that arousal is associated with rapid inhalation, and relaxation is associated with this slow exhalation.

This lets people do, again, a breath-focused mindfulness practice in which you're breathing in – doing it relatively slowly so it's not so arousing, and out as though through a soda straw.

Breathe in gradually, and then out through a soda straw.

Again, this can give people a sense of being not so overwhelmed by the anxiety, and they can move into these other techniques that we've been talking about.

Some folks have suggested using Edmund Jacobson's progressive muscle relaxation.

This was designed in the 1920s and was one of the first “body therapies,” if you will, that was introduced within Western medicine.

He taught people to do something very much like the body scan – perhaps you're familiar with that from mindfulness training.

Instead of just noticing the different parts of the body, you start with the toes and you scrunch up the toes, hold them for a moment and then release – scrunch up, hold for a moment, and release.

You do that with the toes, and then the calves, and then the thighs, and progressively move through the body to the limbs, and then include the neck, the face, and all the different musculature – both tensing and relaxing it.

Now, that too can be done as a mindfulness practice. You can do that and try to simply bring your attention to the sensations that are happening and allow thoughts to come and go.

If anxiety comes up, allow yourself to feel the anxiety. Again, you see the trickiness of this – we’re simultaneously delivering two different messages that run in counter directions: one is about the calming and the other is about the radical acceptance, including acceptance of arousal.

“If anxiety comes up, allow yourself to feel the anxiety.”

In my own practice, I only pull these things out when I’m a little bit desperate – when I think, “This isn’t working. I don’t have enough of a treatment aligned for this person. They don’t have enough of a cognitive understanding of how anxiety is perpetuated by avoidance, and it’s either going to be I teach them something or they go out drinking or take a benzodiazepine.”

In that case, I would be more inclined to teach them these kinds of techniques but use them to form enough of an alliance to be able to lead them toward ultimately saying yes to and opening to all of these different feelings and sensations, including the sensation of anxiety.

Now, a third approach, which is a little bit between radical acceptance and just being with the discomfort and these relaxation techniques, or for that matter the medicines, is to teach equanimity practices.

Equanimity practices are not exactly relaxation practices; they are about opening to the endless kaleidoscope, but feeling held while opening to it – the equanimity part is the holding part.

One of these practices is **the Mountain Meditation**. If you’ve been involved in learning mindfulness practice, whether through my courses or other sources, you’ve probably done some variation on the Mountain Meditation.

Again, I’ll direct you to [mindfulness-solution.com](http://mindfulness-solution.com). You can download the Mountain Meditation and try it.

With this meditation, you imagine yourself as a mountain, perhaps in a mountain range surrounded by other mountains, and then what we do is we go through seasonal changes.

In each season, night and day are alternating with one another. Sometimes it’s stormy, sometimes it’s rainy, sometimes it’s snowy, sometimes it’s hot, and sometimes it’s cold, but the mountain remains through all of those changes.

When people do the Mountain Meditation, what they get is a sense of something being continuous, even through all of the different and changing experiences – all of the different emotional storms.

It’s like identifying with awareness itself.

We also have the metaphor of the sky that's so often used in mindfulness practices: the sky evokes the same sense of identifying with awareness itself – sometimes the sky is filled with clouds, sometimes with rain, sometimes it's stormy, sometimes it's filled with brilliant sunshine, but the sky remains. It contains all of these things.

So yes, equanimity practices lead us in a direction. They can be calming, but they're calming in the context of calming because we're allowing all of the changes to occur.

That's much more in line with a mindfulness-oriented technique. If possible, I would do those exercises before doing relaxation training with folks.

Let me share with you another equanimity practice which is a very nice one. You can have this in your toolkit in addition to the Mountain Meditation that you'll find at [mindfulness-solution.com](http://mindfulness-solution.com).

This is a briefer one and we can do this together.

Close your eyes right now and follow the breath through a few cycles, from an inhalation to the end of that and on to the exhalation and then to the next in breath.

I want you to imagine that you're on a boat and the sun is shining, and the weather is nice. The seas are calm, and you're enjoying your boat ride.

But then clouds begin to roll in and the wind picks up, and the waves become choppy. The boat starts to rock from side to side.

Big thunderheads appear and lightning and thunder goes off, and now the wind is really blowing and the waves are quite intense. You are really rocking – the boat is being tossed about like a cork on a stormy sea, and you are there holding on.

But luckily, you have access to, depending on what feels more comfortable, scuba gear and you know how to scuba dive, or perhaps a diving bell that can take you over the edge.

You get on the scuba gear or you get onto the diving bell, and you go over the side of the boat and beneath the waves.

As soon as you get beneath the waves, you have a sense of stability even as the boat is being tossed from place to place and there is all this wildness taking place above you.

You find your way down to the anchor, which is sitting on the bottom, and there is a sense of stability amidst all the changing forces.

You notice that even though the ocean is being tossed about and the boat is being tossed about, there's a peace available as well.

You stay there at the bottom of the sea, feeling that sense of stability – that sense of being able to tolerate all the changing conditions.

Once you have sufficient confidence, you come back up and return to the boat and wait out the storm.

Now, a practice like that is not going to be for everybody, and this is true of all the practices that we've been talking about.

If somebody has had a near-drowning experience or they can't swim or they're afraid of water, maybe this is not the best meditation for them. However, for a lot of people, it will give the sense that, "Oh, it's possible to have some equanimity in the storm."

The Mountain Meditation isn't for everybody either. I remember the first time I introduced that in either Portland or Seattle in the Northwest, and somebody said, "You know, around here our mountains explode!"

Or another person once said to me, "You know, I've always struggled with my weight, and I don't really like thinking of myself as a mountain."

So, in all of these cases, we want to modify our practices for the particular needs of the person we're working with, but we can experiment and try these different practices with different folks.

"We want to modify our practices for the particular needs of the person we're working with—but we can experience and try different practices with different folks."