

PSYCHOLOGY**TOOLS**

Psychology tools for overcoming PTSD

Audio collection scripts



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Table of contents

Introduction	
About this audio collection	1
Learn about PTSD	2
Physical soothing	
Physical soothing introduction	9
Relaxed breathing introduction	10
Simple relaxed breathing instructions	11
Relaxed breathing with balloon imagery	13
Breathing with colour imagery	15
Breathing with counting instructions	17
Progressive muscle relaxation	19
Peaceful place	24
Grounding	
Grounding introduction	29
Sensory grounding using smells	30
Sensory grounding using your five senses	32
Grounding statements	34
Grounding objects	35
Retraining your brain	
Retraining your brain introduction	39
Mindful attention	41
Stimulus discrimination	44
Improving your sleep	
Improving your sleep introduction	53
Sleep hygiene	55
Recovering from a nightmare	56
Nightmare rescripting	59
Advanced skills	
Advanced skills introduction	65
Testing the effectiveness of your grounding techniques	66
Advanced stimulus discrimination	68

Introduction

About this audio collection

Welcome to the *Psychology Tools for Overcoming PTSD Audio Collection*. It was developed by Dr Matthew Whalley, a clinical psychologist who specialises in the treatment of trauma.

These recordings are for anybody suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Using them will help you to manage the symptoms of PTSD. They were designed for you to use as stand-alone exercises, but if you want more information you will find it in the accompanying book *Psychology Tools for Overcoming PTSD*.

The skills you will learn in these exercises can be incorporated into your daily life – and eventually you will be encouraged to practice them in a variety of situations. To begin with, though, it will be best to choose somewhere for your practice where you won't be disturbed. For your safety, don't listen to these audio recordings while driving or when engaged in any activity where your full attention is required. This audio collection consists of two sets of recordings.

Just learning

These contain a general introduction to PTSD, and then an introduction and detailed instructions for each exercise. This will make you an expert in understanding your PTSD, and will help you understand *why* and *how* each of the exercises is done.

Quick access

These are for when you already know the technique and just need to be guided through it at the right time. They don't have an introduction and just go straight to the exercise.

To begin with it is highly recommended that you listen to the *Just Learning* versions. Then once you are well practised carry the *Quick Access* recordings with you for when you need them.

Learn about PTSD

Before getting straight into the exercises it is important that you know about the key symptoms of PTSD that we are trying to manage.

What is trauma?

A trauma is any distressing or disturbing experience. Common traumatic events include being deliberately hurt by another person (such as physical or sexual abuse), being in an accident, undergoing a medical procedure, or being in a disaster. A trauma can be one-off (and was perhaps unexpected) or trauma can happen more than once (and was perhaps anticipated and feared). Finally, trauma can happen to adults or to children.

There can be different severities of trauma, but what researchers have found is that other people's judgements of your trauma are not that important. What matters is how severe you perceived your trauma to be.

What are the symptoms of PTSD?

Post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, refers to a common set of symptoms that some people suffer following a traumatic event. The American Psychiatric Association separates PTSD symptoms into four main categories.

The first group of symptoms are to do with 're-experiencing' the trauma. Memories of the traumatic event are re-experienced. This can be in the form of spontaneous memories while you are awake (these are sometimes called 'flashbacks'), or the memories might be re-experienced in the form of dreams and nightmares. Trauma memories can be re-experienced in any of the five senses (sight, sound, touch, smell, or taste) and are typically much stronger and more vivid than normal memories. When trauma memories are re-experienced very strongly your sense of time can be affected and it can feel as though the trauma is happening again right now in the present moment. Obviously this can bring back all of the distress you felt at the time. Some people with PTSD might not have such strong memories, but instead react with very strong emotions when they are confronted with reminders of their trauma.

The second group of symptoms are all to do with avoidance. Understandably, people with PTSD make efforts to avoid anything to do with their trauma because it can lead to them feeling distressed. You might avoid thoughts or

feelings related to the trauma, or anything that reminds you of the what happened to you. This can include people, places, television programmes, objects, songs, or situations. Often the avoidance becomes broader and broader with time.

The technical name for the third group of symptoms is ‘negative alterations in cognitions and mood’. These symptoms reflect the fact that people with PTSD feel worse after a trauma – they experience negative changes in their thoughts and feelings. They might have come believe negative things about themselves – like they are bad, or dirty. Or the trauma might have changed the way they see the world – for example that it is dangerous or toxic. Many people with PTSD have an exaggerated sense of blame - it is very common to take too much responsibility for what happened. People with PTSD might also persistently experience other strong emotional states such as fear, horror, guilt, shame, or disgust. It might be very difficult to feel any positive emotions.

The fourth group of symptoms are officially called ‘alterations in arousal and reactivity’. Sometimes they are referred to as ‘hypervigilance’. These symptoms reflect the fact that people who have PTSD are more ‘on edge’ than before. Their bodies and minds are vigilant for any dangers. You might feel more irritable and angry, more on the lookout for threats, unable to concentrate, or you might be acting more recklessly. It is extremely common to have difficulties with sleep – you might find it difficult to get to sleep because of intrusive thoughts, or you might wake up because of nightmares.

Other very common symptoms include dissociation. When you dissociate it may feel as though things are unreal, that perhaps you are detached from your thoughts or body.

Together these groups of symptom add up to PTSD. The result of all these symptoms is that people with PTSD feel a current sense of threat – like they’re currently in danger. This is a bit of a puzzle given that the trauma, the danger, has already happened. Psychologists have worked out that part of the reason for this ‘current sense of threat’ is that memories of the trauma are stored in an unusual way in the brain. Treatment for PTSD eventually involves working with the trauma memories to store them properly. For many people, though, that is initially an overwhelming prospect. First it is important to learn to manage the overwhelming emotions that PTSD brings.

Fight or flight

Human beings and other animals have built-in systems to help them respond to danger and, ultimately, to stay alive. One of these is the 'fight or flight' system. A region of the brain called the amygdala controls this system.

The amygdala gets input from all of your senses (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch) and responds very quickly to any signs of danger. If it thinks there is danger then it sets off an alarm in your body – it tells the adrenal glands to release adrenaline, which prepares the body to either fight or run away. You might find your heart racing, your breathing becoming quicker, feeling sweaty, dizzy, shaky, your stomach churning. You will often feel an urge to get away, or might become very short-tempered. All of these reactions are called your 'fight or flight' response.

In dangerous situations, such as being confronted with a dangerous person or a dangerous animal, then fighting or running away sometimes has a chance of helping you survive the danger. Your fight or flight system may well have been activated during your trauma. This system is useful when there is real danger – human beings would have died out thousands of years ago without it. One problem in PTSD is that this system stays too active for too long after the trauma. It is as though the amygdala becomes hypersensitive. The result is that people with PTSD feel threatened and find it hard to relax.

Some people find it helpful to learn a little more about their amygdala. The amygdala always reacts in a 'better safe than sorry' way – it would rather trigger an alarm unnecessarily than miss a real danger. In this sense it is quite a 'dumb' system – it does one job and it is over-careful.

Even worse, the amygdala isn't very good at distinguishing between real threats 'out there' in the world, and imagined threats that you just think about or picture in your mind. This is a problem because for people with PTSD the trauma is often on their mind – which sets off the amygdala frequently.

The fight or flight system is officially a part of the nervous system called the 'sympathetic nervous system'. You can think of this as the 'get-ready-for-danger' part of the nervous system. Thankfully there is an opposite system, the 'parasympathetic nervous system'. This is the 'soothe-and-unwind' nervous system. We have to deliberately make effort to activate this 'soothe-and-unwind' system and some of the soothing exercises we will practice later are designed to do just this.

Memories in PTSD

Do you remember that one of the key symptoms of PTSD is that you 're-experience' memories of the trauma? Psychologists think that this is because memories in PTSD are stored in an unhelpful way.

When a PTSD memory 'plays' in your mind it is common for it to feel as though that event is happening again right now in the present. We say that the memory has the property of 'nowness' – it feels as though that event is happening now, even though it is actually just a memory from the past. This happens because the brain has not stored the memory properly. The memory doesn't have a 'time stamp' on it, so when the brain 'plays' the memory it feels as though it is happening now. You can imagine it's a bit like your mind is a filing cabinet of photographs (or memories). Most of the photographs have a date stamp written on them, and maybe even a location. Whenever your mind looks at one of these photographs it sees the date stamp and knows that memory is from that date. You feel that the memory is old – that it is just a memory. However, PTSD memories don't have a date stamp on them. When the mind looks at one of these memories it gets confused because it doesn't have the time information. It 'plays' this memory and instead of feeling like a memory it feels like it is happening again now in the present moment.

Ultimately, part of the treatment for PTSD is to 'process' trauma memories – to give them a time stamp and to file them properly in your mind. When PTSD is relatively mild some people can begin this process quickly. Other people find memory work initially too overwhelming and need to develop some resilience before they are ready to attempt it. These recordings are designed to help you to develop those skills.

How common is PTSD?

PTSD is very common. After a serious trauma such as a car accident about 10% of people will develop PTSD. After traumas that involve being hurt deliberately by another person one third to one half develop PTSD. If people experience more than one trauma, or if the trauma happens in childhood then rates of PTSD can be even higher. Sadly, PTSD is often misdiagnosed as depression or anxiety and many people miss out on getting the right treatment.

Important messages in PTSD

Messages that psychologists often try to get across to clients with PTSD are that:

- PTSD does not mean that you are going mad.
- It can be helpful to think about PTSD as a ‘mental injury’ rather than a mental illness - and it is one from which you can recover.
- Finally, PTSD is not a sign of weakness – development of PTSD is closely connected to our neurobiology and happens because of the way the human mind processes memories. It is not your fault that you were traumatised, and it is not your fault that you have PTSD.

Treatment for PTSD

PTSD is a very treatable condition. A variety of therapies have been heavily researched and have been shown to be effective. These include cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), and eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR). Appropriate therapies for PTSD all tend to have something in common – they all involve some exposure to the trauma memories. That means that they eventually involve thinking about, and talking about, what happened to you. Because this can feel like an alarming prospect for many people with PTSD good therapy will pay close attention to your stability before attempting exposure, and therapists will work with you to feel more in control of your symptoms before going in to more detail than you feel you can handle.

The exercises in this package

Treatment for PTSD, particularly ‘complex’ PTSD, has traditionally been done in phases. This is because many people initially find it too overwhelming to start working directly with their experiences of trauma. Typical phases of PTSD treatment include a ‘stabilisation’ stage, followed by a ‘memory processing’ stage, and finishing with a stage aimed at readjusting to a life without PTSD.

The exercises in this package are aimed at the first stage – developing a set of strategies to make you feel more stable and resilient. This package will guide you through a series of exercises:

- The first set will be about physical soothing. The aim of these is to slow down the body’s fight or flight reaction.
- The second set of exercises will be about grounding the mind and coming back to the present moment.
- The third set of exercises will be about brain retraining – teaching the mind

that the trauma is over and that you are safe.

- The fourth set of exercises are about improving your sleep.

For most of the exercises there are two versions. The *Just Learning* pack contains lots of instructions to familiarise yourself with the principles, and to carefully guide you through each exercise. The *Quick Access* pack just contains each exercise without any lengthy introduction. Make sure you are familiar with these *Just Learning* versions before you use the *Quick Access* ones.

Physical soothing

This set of exercises are all about 'physical soothing'.

PTSD heightens your sense of threat and is associated with an overactive 'fight or flight' response. Raised levels of the hormone adrenaline keep the body in a state of readiness for action. This explains why when you have PTSD you find it very hard to relax, to concentrate, or to sleep – your body is constantly ready to respond to danger. Doctors call this the activity of the 'sympathetic nervous system' – the part of the central nervous system that gets us ready for action.

The self-help exercises in this section are designed to promote physical soothing. They activate a different part of the central nervous system that helps us to relax, wind down, and rest – this is your 'parasympathetic nervous system'.

Some people with PTSD can find that these exercises feel strange, unusual, or even threatening at first. If you have had PTSD for a long time you might never have felt safe or soothed, and so these sensations can feel alien to you. If this is the case you are still encouraged to persist with the exercises – everyone deserves to feel soothed – but just recognise that it might take more practice for you to feel the effects.

The exercises in this section are:

- Relaxed breathing (slower, deeper & more regular)
- Breathing with balloon imagery
- Breathing with color imagery
- Breathing with counting instructions
- Progressive muscle relaxation

Relaxed breathing

Safety warning

You can relax almost anywhere, provided that you can sit or lie comfortably without being disturbed.

For your safety, don't listen to these audio recordings while driving or when engaged in any activity where your full attention is required.

If you have a respiratory problem, or any medical condition that makes you concerned about the suitability of breathing exercises for you, then please consult your doctor before you attempt any of these exercises.

Some people with PTSD find that if they close their eyes they are more likely to have a flashback so it is recommended that you keep your eyes open throughout the exercises, at least for the first couple of times that you try it. If you find that you are comfortable closing your eyes then obviously do what feels best for you.

Introduction to the exercises

When we are feeling threatened or scared our body goes through a number of changes in an effort to keep us safe. The 'fight-or-flight response' is an automatic bodily reaction that is designed to get our body ready to cope with danger.

One of the most important changes happens to our breathing. The fight or flight response makes our breathing faster and shallower. It does this so that the body takes in more oxygen. More oxygen means more fuel for the muscles so that we are more able to run away from a danger or, failing that, to fight.

PTSD means having an oversensitive fight-or-flight reaction. Your sympathetic nervous system is very active and your body is in a heightened state of alarm and readiness. It is like having a smoke alarm that goes off even when there is no fire – you can feel threatened even in situations you know are safe..

One way to counteract the effects of the sympathetic nervous system is to activate its counterpart, the parasympathetic nervous system. Relaxed breathing is one way to do this. It helps to correct the oversensitive fight-or-flight response, and will leave you feeling more balanced. There are many different types of breathing exercise.

Breathing exercise 1: Simple relaxed breathing instructions

The aim of this relaxed breathing exercise is to promote relaxation while staying grounded wherever you are. In this exercise you are going to deliberately make your breathing slower, deeper, and more regular than usual. Making these three changes sends a message from your body to your brain that you are safe, and that it is alright to relax.

Start by sitting or lying somewhere comfortable. Sitting upright with your feet flat on the floor is a good posture. If you prefer to lie down make sure that your head and neck are well-supported. If you're keeping your eyes open choose a spot to look at, and focus your attention on that point, otherwise close your eyes now.

Begin the exercise by noticing your breathing ... just turning your attention to your breath ... beginning to notice the air flowing in and out of your body. At this stage you are not trying to change it in any way ... you are just noticing. Notice whether you are breathing high up in the chest ... or low down ... whether you are breathing quickly ... or slowly ... whether you are breathing in jerky, changing rhythms ... or whether the rhythm of your breath is steady.

You are now going to deliberately make your breathing slower, deeper, and more regular. This activates your parasympathetic nervous system and triggers a relaxation response.

For this exercise try to breathe in through your nose. Breathing through your nose automatically reduces the rate of your breathing.

Take a steady breath in through your nose ... pause for a moment and then breathe out in a steady continuous flow ... take another breath in through your nose ... pause for a moment ... and breathe out steadily ... carry on breathing in this slower-than-normal rhythm ... making the in-breath last much longer than normal ... and also making the out-breath last much longer than normal.

You're aiming to breathe steadily and continuously ... the air flowing into your lungs in one slow smooth movement ... and then flowing out of your lungs in another slow smooth continuous movement ... your in-breath and out-breath should be lasting about the same length of time ... somewhere in the region of a count of three.

Having made your breathing slower and more regular you may have noticed that you are now breathing more deeply than you were before ... that you are breathing relaxed breaths lower in your tummy rather than shallow breaths high up in your chest ... if you haven't already, then make an effort to breathe more deeply than normal ... as if you were filling your tummy with air.

Carry on breathing in this slower, deeper, and more regular rhythm ... as you continue to breathe more calmly and steadily you will notice that you feel more relaxed ... as you take the time to send these messages to your parasympathetic nervous system it will respond by slowing down and allowing you to unwind ... body and mind.

To end the exercise ... begin to turn your attention to your surroundings ... noticing where you are and what is around you.

Breathing exercise 2: Relaxed breathing with balloon imagery

The aim of this relaxed breathing exercise is to promote relaxation while staying grounded wherever you are. In this exercise you are going to deliberately make your breathing slower, deeper, and more regular than usual. Making these three changes sends a message from your body to your brain that you are safe, and that it is all right to relax.

Start by sitting or lying somewhere comfortable. Sitting upright with your feet flat on the floor is a good posture. If you prefer to lie down make sure that your head and neck are well supported. If you're keeping your eyes open choose a spot to look at, and focus your attention on that point, otherwise close your eyes now.

Begin the exercise by noticing your breathing ... just turning your attention to your breath ... beginning to notice the air flowing in and out of your body. At this stage you are not trying to change it in any way ... you are just noticing. Notice whether you are breathing high up in the chest ... or low down ... whether you are breathing quickly ... or slowly ... whether you are breathing in jerky, changing rhythms ... or whether the rhythm of your breath is steady.

You are now going to deliberately make your breathing slower, deeper, and more regular.

Breathe in slowly through your nose ... filling your lungs ... now as you breathe out imagine that you are blowing up a balloon with a long, slow, deliberate breath.

Breathing in again very steadily ... filling your lungs with one smooth continuous movement ... and then continuing to fill the balloon with a long continuous out-breath.

Breathing in slowly through your nose ... filling your lungs ... now as you breathe out imagine that you are blowing up a balloon with a long, slow, deliberate breath.

Breathing in again very steadily ... filling your lungs with one smooth continuous movement ... and then continuing to fill the balloon with a long continuous out-breath.

Breathe in slowly through your nose ... filling your lungs ... now as you breathe out imagine that you are blowing up a balloon with a long, slow, deliberate breath.

Breathing in again very steadily ... filling your lungs with one smooth continuous movement ... and then continuing to fill the balloon with a long continuous out-breath.

And as you continue to blow up this balloon with smooth steady breaths ... notice that it gets bigger and bigger ... you're inflating this balloon at a steady pace ... no need to go any faster ... just steadily inflating this balloon with calm breaths.

Your breathing becoming much more regular ... breathing smooth continuous breaths in through your nose ... and then continuing to inflate your balloon ... and just noticing it getting bigger and bigger as you relax more and more.

There's no danger of this balloon popping ... you can safely inflate it as large as it needs to be ... just continuing to inflate it with smooth steady breaths ... and noticing that as you continue to breathe slowly and steadily your physiology changes and you become calmer and physically more relaxed.

You can carry on inflating this balloon for as long as you need to ... breathing calmly and steadily ... but when you're feeling soothed enough to stop you can tie the balloon and allow it to float away ... taking any worries or tensions with it as you return your attention back to the world around you.

To end the exercise ... begin to turn your attention to your surroundings ... noticing where you are and what is around you.

Breathing exercise 3: Relaxed breathing with coloured breathing instructions

The aim of this relaxed breathing exercise is to promote relaxation while staying grounded wherever you are. In this exercise you are going to use the power of your imagination in combination with a breathing exercise in order to help you to relax.

Start by sitting or lying somewhere comfortable. Sitting upright with your feet flat on the floor is a good posture. If you prefer to lie down make sure that your head and neck are well supported. If you're keeping your eyes open choose a spot to look at, and focus your attention on that point, otherwise close your eyes now.

In order to relax, some people find it helpful to visualise themselves breathing out all of the tension in their body. So pick a colour representing tension, and imagine ... and begin to feel ... yourself breathing out breath tinged with that colour ... and as you do so just allow yourself to feel the tension draining out of your body ... breathing out that tense coloured breath and allowing it to float away and disperse, so it can't bother you.

See yourself breathing out that tension ... and notice all of the muscles in your body relaxing more and more with each breath ... breathing out all of the tension in your body, and being left with relaxed, easy feelings of comfort and ease ... just keep breathing out that tense coloured breath for as long as you need ... becoming more and more relaxed with each breath. Your breathing becoming slower, deeper and calmer every time you breathe out more and more tension.

And you might find that as you successfully breathe out the tension, that the colour becomes paler and paler, as all of the tension leaves your body ... breath by breath. You can carry on breathing away tension for as long as you find it helpful.

And the tension reduces ... breath by breath ... you might like to imagine replacing it with calm, relaxed feelings. So imagine a colour representing calm, easy feelings of relaxation ... and visualise breathing in air tinged with this calming, soothing colour. As you do so, you might feel waves of calm spreading through your body with every breath you take ... becoming calmer and more relaxed with every breath you take ... just allowing this calm to spread through your body ... relaxing all of your muscles ... relaxing deeper and deeper with every breath you take ... every breath making you feel calmer, and more relaxed than before.

Carry on breathing ... calmly and steadily ... breathing out any tension that you notice ... and choosing to breathe in calm, relaxed feelings of wellbeing. You can carry on breathing in this soothing way for as long as you need to ... maintaining this state of calm relaxation.

To end the exercise ... begin to turn your attention to your surroundings ... noticing where you are and what is around you. Feeling calm and soothed.

Breathing exercise 4: Relaxed breathing with counting

The aim of this relaxed breathing exercise is to promote relaxation while staying grounded wherever you are. In this exercise you are going to deliberately make your breathing slower, deeper, and more regular than usual. Making these three changes sends a message from your body to your brain that you are safe, and that it is alright to relax.

Start by sitting or lying somewhere comfortable. Sitting upright with your feet flat on the floor is a good posture. If you prefer to lie down make sure that your head and neck are well-supported. If you're keeping your eyes open, choose a spot to look at, and focus your attention on that point, otherwise close your eyes now.

Begin the exercise by noticing your breathing ... just turning your attention to your breath ... beginning to notice the air flowing in and out of your body. At this stage you are not trying to change it in any way ... you are just noticing. Notice whether you are breathing high up in the chest ... or low down ... whether you are breathing quickly ... or slowly ... whether you are breathing in jerky, changing rhythms ... or whether the rhythm of your breath is steady.

In a moment you are going to deliberately make your breathing slower, deeper, and more regular ... some people find it helpful to count when they do a relaxed breathing exercise ... so this time I want you to breathe to a rhythm as I count.

I will ask you to breathe in for a count of three ... and I want you to slowly and steadily breathe in for the whole time that I count ... 1 ... 2 ... 3 ... then I will ask you to breathe out ... and again I want you to breathe out slowly and steadily for the whole time that I count ... 1 ... 2 ... 3 ...

Here we go ... breathing in ... 1 ... 2 ... 3 ... and breathing out ... 1 ... 2 ... 3 ... and breathing in ... 1 ... 2 ... 3 ... and breathing out ... 1 ... 2 ... 3 ... and breathing in ... 1 ... 2 ... 3 ... and breathing out ... 1 ... 2 ... 3 ...

Carry on counting in your head as you breathe in that steady rhythm ... making sure that you breathe in steadily for the whole of the in-count ... and breathe out steadily for the whole of the out-count.

And feel free to vary the count to find a rhythm that suits you ... you might find that breathing in and out for a count of four is more comfortable ... the key thing

is that you find a rhythm that is slower, deeper, and more regular than normal ... and one that is comfortable and soothing for you.

Just carry on counting as you breathe in and out ... noticing that your body and mind relax as you calm your physiology.

You can carry on breathing in this relaxed rhythm for as long as you find helpful.

To end the exercise ... begin to turn your attention to your surroundings ... noticing where you are and what is around you. Feeling calm and soothed.

Progressive muscle relaxation

Safety warning

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Some people with PTSD find that if they close their eyes they are more likely to have a flashback so it is recommended that you keep your eyes open throughout the exercises, at least for the first couple of times that you try it. If you find that you are comfortable closing your eyes then obviously do what feels best for you.

Introduction to the exercise

When we are feeling threatened or scared our body goes through a number of changes in an effort to keep us safe. The fight-or-flight response is an automatic bodily reaction which is designed to get our body ready to cope with danger.

One of these changes is that our muscles tense to prepare for action. If there is a real danger this means that we are more ready to run away from a danger at a moment's notice or, if we can't run, then we are ready to fight. This is called the fight or flight reaction.

Unfortunately what we know is that when we have PTSD our fight-or-flight reaction is too sensitive – it often goes off even when there is no danger.

Progressive muscle relaxation is a great way to correct this unhelpful reaction of the fight-or-flight response. Deliberately relaxing the muscles in the body signals to the mind that you are safe, that there is no danger, and that you are safe to relax once again.

Instructions

The aim of this muscle relaxation exercise is to promote relaxation while staying grounded wherever you are.

In this exercise we will be gently tensing and relaxing parts of your body in turn.

Relaxation should be an enjoyable experience, so if you find any part too difficult don't force yourself, but rather leave that part out for the moment and perhaps come back to it later. In particular, if you have any injuries you may wish to skip that part of your body when the exercise gets to that point.

You will probably find learning to relax easier if you are lying down flat on your back, although you can also do this exercise sitting well-supported in a comfortable chair.

So for this relaxation session make sure you are sitting well-supported, or lying down comfortably on a firm bed, a couch, or on the floor. Support your head and neck with a pillow or cushion. It is essential to keep warm while relaxing, so cover yourself with a lightweight quilt or blanket. Loosen any tight clothing, remove your shoes, and make sure that you won't be disturbed for at least fifteen minutes.

I'll give you a few moments to settle down and make yourself comfortable.

So, sitting or lying down comfortably, make sure that your head, neck, arms and legs are all positioned evenly. Your heels should be a few inches apart. Let the feet fall open sideways. Your neck and spine should be in line without the head tilting to one side. Relax your face by dropping your jaw open a little. Take a slow deep breath. Then breathe out with a sigh, letting all tensions drain out of your body as you exhale. Let your whole body become limp and heavy.

Breathe normally, calmly, and gently. Without controlling it in any way. As you relax you will find that your breathing automatically settles into a slow and peaceful rhythm.

An important step in learning to relax is by learning to let go of unnecessary tension held in the muscles. Releasing muscle tension has the effect of signalling to the brain that everything is well and that there is nothing to worry about. There is no need to panic or to be anxious.

In order to release the tension in our bodies, first we need to become aware of what tension is and what it feels like to release it. A simple way to do this is to gently tense and relax the main muscle groups individually. For example, think of your arms and hands. Start with the right side. Clench your right fist and tighten the muscles in the arm. Then release the tension and let the arm and hand relax. Noting how limp and heavy it feels. Repeat with the left arm. Clench the fist and

tighten the muscles. Release, and notice the feeling of limpness and heaviness in your arms. Repeat with the legs. Tense the right leg. Lift the knee slightly. Notice the tension. Relax and lower. Repeat with the left leg. Tense, raise the knee. Lower, and feel the tension flowing away from the feet, legs, and thighs. Allow the legs to become limp and heavy. Let the feet fall open loosely to the sides.

Next, gently tense your stomach and chest muscles. Release the tension, and allow the abdominal and chest muscles to become soft – breathe easily and smoothly. Now tense the back muscles by pulling the shoulders back slightly. And slowly release. Notice the tension flowing away from your back and shoulder blades.

Gently tense your neck and throat muscles by pushing the head back into whatever is supporting your head. And release the tension. End the sequence by tensing the muscles of your face ... And release ... Allow your forehead to become smooth. Let your jaw fall open slightly, parting your lips and teeth.

Now we will repeat this sequence again, observing the difference between your muscles being tense and being relaxed. So stretch your arms out and gently tense your fists. Feel the tension in your hands and arms ... Hold the tension briefly ... Then release, dropping your hands and arms down heavily. Uncurl your fingers, leaving them loosely open. Notice the sensation of ease and relaxation in your hands and arms.

Now we'll do the same with your legs. Gently tense your feet, calf, and thigh muscles. Notice the tension for a moment, and release. Letting the feet and legs sink down heavily. Let your feet fall open loosely to the sides. Next, turn your attention to the stomach and chest. Breathe in deeply and notice the tension. Breathe out with a sigh, and feel the muscles of your abdomen and chest becoming loose and soft.

Now pull your shoulders back slightly. Notice the tension in the shoulder muscles and along the back. Release the pull, and feel relaxation spreading through- out your shoulders and back.

Press your head and neck into the surface supporting them. Become aware of the tension around your throat and neck. Release the pressure, and register the feeling of ease and comfort in the neck muscles as they become soft and supple.

Now tense your face. Notice the tension in the eyes, jaw, lips and forehead. And

release, letting your jaw fall open slightly. Notice the feeling of relaxation as your forehead becomes smooth. Your lips and jaw become loose and free.

We will repeat the sequence again. This time as you progress up the body, through the muscle groups, use only the slightest tension. Concentrate more on the feeling of relaxation rather than on the process of tensing the muscles.

So, very gently, tense your feet and legs ... and release.

Then your stomach muscles ... and relax. Tense your hands and arms ... and release.

Gently tense your back from your shoulders down to the base of your spine ... And let go of the tension.

Now tense your neck ... and release the tension.

Tense the face ... and relax, letting your jaw fall open slightly.

Finally, we can remove any tension just by becoming aware of each muscle group and deliberately allowing any tension to flow away.

So become aware of your feet. Let them fall open to the sides, and allow tension to flow away.

Now concentrate on your legs ... allow them to relax ... your legs and feet feel limp and heavy.

Become aware of your abdomen, which is loose and moving freely with the breath.

Next, concentrate on your hands and arms ... rest the hands comfortably to the sides. Feel your hands and arms sinking down.

Now feel the weight of your back and head sinking downwards. Your eyes are still and heavy.

Your lips are slightly apart.

Your forehead is smooth.

Your whole body now feels heavy and limp. The feeling of calmness is spreading up like a wave from your feet to your head. You feel very calm and peaceful. You are breathing slowly and gently, while becoming aware of the feeling of heaviness and calmness spreading throughout your body.

All tension has ebbed away, to be replaced by feelings of well-being and contentment. A pleasant comfortable feeling spreads through your body and mind, and for a few moments you can enjoy these feelings of inner peace, calmness, and security.

Remember that you can use this simple method whenever you need to release tension simply by going through the steps we have practiced.

And now to end, gradually reorient yourself to your surroundings. Look around before getting up in your own time ... Feeling peaceful, relaxed, and ready to face the world with confidence, and renewed energy.

Peaceful place exercise

Safety warning

You can relax almost anywhere, provided that you can sit or lie comfortably without being disturbed.

For your safety, don't listen to these audio recordings while driving or when engaged in any activity where your full attention is required.

Introduction to the exercise

Having flashbacks or nightmares where we re-experience trauma memories takes us away from the present moment and makes us feel as though the trauma is happening again right now. This leads the brain to make a mistake and sets off the fight-or-flight reaction, and suddenly you're feeling overwhelming fear, anger or distress.

The peaceful place exercise is a way of reminding the brain that everything is safe. Our bodies react strongly to images in our minds – good examples are when our mouth waters when we think of our favourite meal, or if we blush at the thought of an embarrassing memory. The body reacts to positive imagery too, and so if we deliberately bring about positive imagery we can activate the parasympathetic nervous system and physiologically soothe ourselves.

By imagining ourselves in a peaceful place we can physiologically soothe ourselves. In this exercise you will be guided through steps of a guided imagery designed to soothe you. You can choose to go in your mind to a peaceful place that you have been to before – a real place – or you can go somewhere completely imaginary. There are no rules – just pick somewhere that makes you feel comfortable.

Before we start the exercise spend a few moments thinking about where your peaceful place might be. Do you prefer the indoors or the outdoors? Somewhere manicured and looked-after, or somewhere wild and natural? Do you have memories of places where you have felt peaceful? Or would you prefer to create somewhere completely from scratch?

Before we start the exercise it can be helpful to prepare for elements of it beforehand. Where might your peaceful place be? During the exercise you will

be cued to think about some of the qualities of your peaceful place. Spend a few moments now thinking about what you might prefer:

- Do you prefer the indoors or outdoors?
- Somewhere manicured and looked-after? Or somewhere wild and natural?
- Would you be alone or with other people?
- Do you have memories of places where you have felt peaceful? Or would you prefer to create somewhere completely from scratch?
- What can you see in your peaceful place?
- What can you hear there?
- What can you touch there?
- What can you smell there?
- Where does your awareness drift to in this place?

Don't feel committed to any of the ideas you just had. When you do the exercise in a few moments just allow your mind to be as creative as it wants to be, and go with whatever makes you feel most comfortable.

Instructions

The aim of this peaceful place exercise is to promote a feeling of peace or soothing.

You will probably find learning to relax easier if you are lying down flat on your back, although you can also do this exercise sitting well supported in a comfortable chair. So for this relaxation session make sure you are sitting well supported, or lying down comfortably on a firm bed, couch, or on the floor. Support your head and neck with a pillow or cushion. It is essential to keep warm while relaxing, so cover yourself with a lightweight quilt or blanket. Loosen any tight clothing, remove your shoes, and make sure that you won't be disturbed for at least five minutes.

To begin with ... take a deep breath in, hold it for a moment ... then breathe out with a sigh ... letting go of any tension.

We are going to use the power of your imagination to make a feeling of peacefulness and soothing. I will suggest that you direct your attention towards

certain parts but don't feel that you have to follow the instructions I give. Allow your attention to wander in this place wherever it needs to go.

Just visualise a peaceful scene in your mind's eye. Allow a place to come to mind in its own time. You might think of a place straight away, or you might select from one place out of many. Think about your own special, peaceful place. It could be a beautiful room or garden, a beach or an oasis. You could create a haven of peace and tranquility in your imagination. Somewhere you would love to retreat to.

Imagine the entrance to this place. You walk in and find somewhere comfortable to sit. You feel very peaceful. There is no work to be done, no demands on you. This place can be whatever you need it to be.

In your mind's eye observe all of the sights of this place ... all of the colours, textures, and features of this place. The more details you can visualise the better.

Listen for any sounds of this place and let them wash over you. Just allow the beauty and peace of your own oasis of calmness to soothe your mind and emotions. You're feeling good, confident, peaceful and contented. Notice what you feel in your body as you enjoy being in this peaceful place.

Silently say to yourself *"I feel peaceful and contented"*, *"I feel peaceful and contented"*.

As you do this you begin to feel tranquil, serene, and content. You have banished restless thoughts by focusing on a peaceful place. All tension has drifted away and disappeared, to be replaced by tranquility and contentment, a pleasant harmonious feeling pervades your body, mind, and soul.

For a few moments you can enjoy the contented feeling of inner peace, calmness, and security.

And remember that you can use this simple stress-relief method whenever you need to unwind by simply relaxing the body and calming the mind with peaceful thoughts, and silently saying to yourself *"I feel peaceful and contented"*, *"I feel peaceful and contented"*, *"I feel peaceful and contented"*.

And now to end, gradually reorient yourself to your surroundings. Gently open your eyes before getting up in your own time ... Feeling peaceful, relaxed, and ready to face the world with confidence, and renewed energy.

Grounding

This set of exercises are about grounding yourself back in the present moment.

Having PTSD means that your mind will have a tendency to either focus on events from the past or worries about the future. Thoughts, memories, or images will come involuntarily, and can leave you feeling distressed.

Flashbacks take you to the past, back to the trauma. You might get images in your mind of what happened or, in a stronger flashback, it might feel like an event from the past is happening again right now. Flashbacks are just memories, but the way they are stored means that when they are replayed in your mind they are experienced as much more vivid and emotionally more powerful than normal memories.

Anxious thoughts and images take us to the future. When you are worrying about what might happen you are caught up in a fear about the future. Worries might be accompanied by a picture in your mind's eye of things going wrong. Anxious thinking can be extremely powerful and overwhelming.

A key step in overcoming PTSD is learning to bring your mind back to the present moment, where you are safe. This is called 'grounding' because it is all about 'grounding' yourself in the present moment. There are a wide variety of different grounding techniques. Many of them use your senses to ground you in the here- and-now.

The exercises and techniques in this section are:

- Sensory grounding using smells
- Sensory grounding using what is around you (5-4-3-2-1)
- Grounding statements
- Grounding objects

Sensory grounding by using smells

The sense of smell is a fantastic way to ground your self in the present moment. Smell is one of our most primitive and powerful senses. The part of the brain that processes smell – called the olfactory bulb – is directly connected to the part of the brain that processes danger and emotion – called the amygdala. This means that smell is a very quick way of affecting our emotional responses.

Different smells can serve different purposes. You may have already tried using a soothing smell to help to relax and calm yourself. If you are having a flashback though, and need to come back to the present moment, then it is helpful to use a strong smell – for this purpose it does not even have to be a smell you like. To be useful, you will need to have the smell with you wherever you go.

The first step to grounding yourself with smell will be to pick a grounding smell. For this sensory grounding exercise we want to use a strong smell to bring you back to the present moment. A great source of smells are the small bottles of essential oil which you can buy from a chemist or pharmacist. Other common sources of smells are natural herbs and spices, or perfumes. The strongest smells tend to be traditional smelling salts that contain ammonia. Other strong smells include eucalyptus, tea-tree, or mint.

The instructions for this exercise will start in a moment. Pause this recording and go and find a grounding smell now.

Instructions

For this sensory grounding exercise you are going to use your chosen smell to ground yourself in the present moment. This exercise assumes that you have found a favourite grounding smell and that you have it available to hand. If you don't have one then pause this recording and go and find a suitable smell now.

We use smell because the part of your brain that processes smells, the olfactory bulb, is directly connected to your amygdala, the part of your brain that detects danger. The result of this is that powerful smells can disrupt the amygdala when it becomes unnecessarily active.

Keep your eyes open throughout this exercise. Begin by taking a smell of your grounding smell ... put the smell as close to your nose as is comfortable and inhale

slowly and deeply

The smell will automatically grab your attention ... go with this and turn your mind towards your grounding smell ... concentrate on this smell ... really focus on what it smells like ...

Ask yourself some questions about this smell ... and allow the answers to float into your mind ... what does this smell smell like? ... what other smells is it similar to? ... if you had to describe this smell to someone else how would you describe it? ... if this smell had a color, what color would it be? ... if this smell had a texture what texture would it be? ... if this smell had a shape what shape would it be?

Now turn your attention to where you are. Notice your surroundings and remind yourself where you are, remind yourself of the current date and time, and remind yourself that you are safe now.

Sensory grounding by using your five senses

Flashbacks and intrusive memories in PTSD take us away from the present moment. When the memory 'plays' in our mind it can feel like the event is happening again in the present moment. If the flashback is very strong we might lose touch with our surroundings – your memory can trick you into feeling like the trauma is happening again right now

At this stage, when we're learning to cope with the symptoms of PTSD, it isn't helpful to spend time dwelling on these memories, or being 'lost' in them. Instead, when we get lost in a memory it is a good idea to bring ourselves back to the present moment as quickly as possible to reduce our distress. We can do this by using our five senses to focus on our surroundings.

Instructions

For this sensory grounding exercise you are going to use your five senses (sight, sound, touch, smell and taste) to ground yourself in the present moment. It will be a useful exercise if you have a flashback. You don't need any props to do this exercise so you can do it anywhere at any time.

Begin by focusing your attention on five things you can see around you – say the names out loud or in your head.

Now focus on four things you can touch ... maybe your own clothing ... or objects that are nearby ... feel free to run your fingers along them – really notice any textures – say the names out loud or in your head.

Next focus your attention on three things you can hear around you – say the names out loud or in your head.

Now focus on two things you can smell ... if there is not much to hand then try smelling your own clothing ... maybe you can smell fabric detergent – say the names out loud or in your head.

Lastly focus on one things you can taste ... take a drink if you have one to hand ... remember the absence of taste can also be a taste – say the name out loud or in your head.

Now turn your attention to where you are right now ... notice your surroundings and remind yourself where you are ... remind yourself of the current date and time ... and remind yourself that you are safe now.

Grounding statements

The hallmark symptom of PTSD is feeling a sense of current threat – not feeling safe in the here-and-now. In PTSD the fear persists even when the danger has passed. Psychologists know that the fear persists because the part of the mind that is fearful about danger has not received the updated message that it is safe.

If you have PTSD it is helpful to remind yourself regularly that the trauma is over and that you are safe.

Therapists working with clients with PTSD will often do this if a client has a flashback in their office. They might say the client's name to get their attention, and gently remind them where they are, and that they are safe now.

Instructions

One of the key symptoms of PTSD is that we do not feel safe, despite all evidence to the contrary. It is as though the fact “you are safe now” struggles to sink in. Practising your grounding statements will remind you that you are safe, and will calm your fight or flight system.

This exercise consists of saying the following statements to yourself, either in your head or out loud. As we go along personalise the statements by replacing the blanks with true facts about your life:

- The trauma happened in the year <blank>
- It is now the year <blank> and I am safe
- I know the trauma is over because <blank>
- I know I am safe now because <blank>
- When the trauma happened I was <blank> years old ... I am [blank] years old now
- The location the trauma happened in was [blank] ... The location I am in now is <blank> ... I am safe here

You might find it helpful to write down your grounding statements and read them to yourself regularly. You could even record yourself speaking them. The more you practice the more reassuring you will find them.

Grounding objects

Grounding objects are another form of sensory grounding. That is, using our senses to ground ourselves in the present moment. Many people find it extremely helpful and reassuring to carry a grounding object with them. A grounding object is something tactile for you to feel with your hand. People often carry objects that are pleasant to feel in the hand, but it doesn't necessarily have to be a 'nice' object. Some people carry spiky objects such as pinecones which they find diverting. It is often helpful if the object carries some special meaning for you.

Some examples of grounding objects might be helpful here:

- One client I knew carried a photograph with her. It had a picture of happy events that happened after her trauma. She used it to remind herself that her life did not end on the night of the trauma, and that she has had happy times since then. Part of why it was helpful to her was that it 'proved' to her that she had survived.
- Another client carried a pebble from a beach that reminded him of positive memories from his childhood.
- Another client carried a 'clicky' child's toy. It was a plastic toy which could be broken into pieces with a satisfying click, and could then be put back together.

In a moment I want to you pause this recording and try to find two grounding objects:

First I want you to find a grounding object that gives you the message that you are safe now. Perhaps a photo of a happy event that happened after the trauma was over, or an object to represent a happy moment that occurred after the trauma. Take some time now to find an object that has good associations like that for you now – something that says to you *"you're safe, you're ok, the trauma is in the past"*.

Then I want you to find a grounding object that is less about meaning, but has good sensory tactile qualities. A keyring, a rock, something you can fiddle with that feels nice in your hand, or which feels interesting in your hand. Pause the recording and go and find these grounding objects now.

Great. You're back. Now that you have found some grounding objects we will practice using them to ground yourself.

Instructions

First we are going to 'set up' the grounding object. Do this when you are feeling calm and feeling safe.

Hold the grounding object in your hand. Pay close attention to it. Notice what it looks like, what it feels like in your hand, the weight, the texture. Think about what this object means to you. Why does it help you stay calm? Why does it bring you back to the here and now? Why does it remind you that you are safe?

From now on, carry this object with you. If you ever find yourself feeling agitated or uptight hold this object in your hand. Play with it. Remind yourself of why you chose it.

Retraining your brain

This is the ‘retraining your brain’ section. It contains two exercises that people with PTSD have found helpful in retraining some of their unwanted reactions or responses.

Why do I need to retrain my brain?

Well, in PTSD the brain often starts to make some unhelpful connections and gets into some bad habits.

One bad habit is that after trauma your mind may spend more time in the past – in memories – or more time in the future – worrying about what might happen. Many people find mindfulness exercises helpful for coming back to the present moment.

Another bad habit is over-generalising. The brain’s number one job is to help us to stay alive. It is always trying to do this in the background, even if we are not aware of it. After a trauma one way in which the brain tries to help is to look for ‘warning signs’ which were present at the time of the trauma. It does this because if it could recognise these ‘warning signs’ next time then it might help to prevent you from going through any further traumas in the future. For example, if you were bitten by a dog with brown fur your brain might think “*dogs with brown fur will attack me*”. Anytime you see a brown dog you may automatically feel more alert, or even anxious. And it might even generalise to any dog. Even white dogs, or golden dogs, will set off that anxiety reaction. Unfortunately life isn’t this simple though – in the right circumstances most dogs are friendly – and your brain is over-reacting by saying “*danger danger danger*”. In this case the brain has ‘over-generalised’ and has learned its lesson too broadly. To fully treat the PTSD your brain has to re-learn that not all dogs are going to attack you. Maybe it needs to pay more attention to the behaviour of the dog (or the owner) – whether it is threatening (in which case it is right to be worried), or whether it is relaxed (in which case it doesn’t need to raise the alarm).

In PTSD the brain will be doing a lot of this ‘threat management’ automatically, and our internal ‘alarm system’ may be getting set off very often. The exercises in this section are twofold. The first, mindful attention retrains you to pay

attention to the present moment. This is powerful because if you are aware in the present moment you can choose how to respond. The second is called 'stimulus discrimination' which is another brain training exercise to break the links between triggers and your trauma memories.

Mindful attention

People with PTSD often have busy minds. They typically spend either a lot of time in the past (on memories), ruminating unhelpfully about things they think they did wrong, or worrying about things that might go wrong in the future. It is usually the case that none of these places are calm.

Mindful attention is an exercise in which you can train yourself to bring your attention back to the present moment. Practising a mindful attention exercise gives you power because the more readily you are able to recognise that your mind has wandered, the more likely you are to be able to do something about it.

Every time you notice that your mind has wandered you are having a powerful moment because in that moment you have a choice about what you do with your mind – do you continue to dwell on a memory or a worry? Or do you distract yourself and do something more productive instead?

The opposite of mindfulness is ‘mindlessness’. Mindlessness is not a powerful position because you are at the mercy of wherever your mind chooses to wander – whether that is pain in the past or anxiety about the future.

This mindfulness exercise is a ‘brain training’ exercise. Neuroscientific research on mindfulness has shown that regular practice can lead to desirable changes in brain activity – even to changes in the structure of the brain.

Instructions

This mindful attention exercise is deceptively simple. Your only job is to pay attention to your breathing – just to notice yourself breathing in and out – nothing else! The catch is that it is inevitable that your attention will wander. Your attention might get captured by thoughts, memories, images, worries, sounds, feelings, or other sensations. When you notice that your mind has wandered your first job is to congratulate yourself for noticing, and then to bring your attention back to the present moment – back to your breath. If your attention wanders once you are to bring it back once. If it wanders 100 times then bring it back 100 times. The point is not to have a mind that doesn’t wander (that’s not how human minds work) but is to become practised at noticing when it has wandered. In that moment you have a powerful choice about what to do with your attention.

First, find a place to sit comfortably where you will not be disturbed for five minutes. If you can, try to sit upright. This is not a relaxation exercise, but is instead designed to help you to train your attention. Our intention for these five minutes is to become mindfully aware of our breathing. Close your eyes if you are comfortable doing so, otherwise choose a spot to focus on.

<chime>

To begin, focus your attention on your breath ... don't try to control it in any way ... just notice ...

It is often helpful to choose a location to focus on ... whether that's your chest rising and falling with your breath ... or noticing the sensation of the air flowing in and out of your nose ... just pick a location and try to keep your attention focused on that spot for the rest of the exercise.

Just paying attention to your breathing ... noticing whether it is fast or slow ... whether you are breathing high up in the chest or low down ... whether your breathing is jerky or whether you are breathing in a steady rhythm ... just noticing ...

As you continue to focus your attention on your breathing you might notice that your mind has wandered ... and that's ok ... Buddhist meditation trainers often refer to the human mind as the 'monkey mind' because it is easily distracted ... if you notice that your mind has wandered then firstly congratulate yourself for noticing ... and then gently return your attention to your breath ...

Just noticing the rise and fall of your breath ... being aware of your body breathing ... in the present moment ...

And again ... if you notice that your mind has wandered ... just congratulate yourself for noticing ... and gently bring your attention back to your breath ...

Paying attention to your breath ... right now in the present moment ... noticing the sensation of your breath ... as you continue to breathe ...

<chime>

And now begin to gently return your attention to the world around you ...

noticing the sounds around you ... noticing your surroundings ... and bringing your full awareness to your present situation.

Stimulus discrimination

Trauma memories are easily triggered by stimuli in the world around us. These triggers can be sights, sounds, smells, touches, tastes, or even ideas that resemble things that were present at the time of the trauma. For example, one woman's memories of her trauma were triggered by the rain because it was raining when she was attacked. Another person's trauma happened in a small room at a hospital, and his memories were triggered by being in rooms that, to him, had a similar confined feeling.

When trauma memories are triggered like this they can be 're-experienced' – it can feel as though the trauma, or parts of it, are actually happening again in the present moment. This happens because your brain has not properly registered that the traumatic event happened in the past. When you have PTSD your brain very easily notices superficial similarities between then and now, like *"it is raining"* or *"I am in a small room"*, and makes the mistake of thinking the trauma is happening now. What is missing is the big picture information – important facts like *"the trauma happened in the past"* and *"I'm safe now"*.

Stimulus discrimination is a technique that trains your brain to put memories where they belong – in the past. With practice your brain will get better at noticing the differences between then and now – meaning that memories are less likely to be triggered, and helping you to feel safer in the present moment. To put it another way, stimulus discrimination deliberately breaks the link between the triggers and the trauma memory.

There are four steps involved in breaking the link between triggers and a trauma memory. First you need to notice when a trauma memory has been triggered. Then you will be invited to notice what is similar between your trauma memory and the present moment – this trains you to get better at noticing things in

your environment that are triggering your trauma memories. The next step is to systematically remind your self of what is different now compared to then. You will go through all of the sensory properties (sight, sound, touch, smell, taste) as well as body feelings and thoughts, and you will pay a lot of attention to what is different now compared to then. It is this step – paying attention to differences – that a brain with PTSD initially finds quite difficult. The final step is to reassure ourselves that we are safe. Now that we know that our trauma is not happening again, we need to deliberately and kindly offer ourselves reassurance. This will

activate our internal soothing system, reducing our sense of threat.

Stimulus discrimination will require you to be persistent and courageous, but the pay-off is worth it. It is a technique which will work over time, but it will require repeated practice. That's why we think of it as a 'brain retraining' technique. Once you have got really good at noticing the differences between then and now, you can go further by deliberately provoking your trauma memory – and then using that as an opportunity to pay attention to the differences between then and now. Eventually you will find that fewer things around you are able to trigger flash-backs.

That might all have sounded quite complicated, so before we get started, let's consider an example. One woman who was sexually assaulted had memories of her trauma triggered when she tried to have an intimate relationship with her new partner. This was frustrating for her because she loved her partner and knew that she was safe in her current relationship. Her therapist trained her in stimulus discrimination. She learned that during intimate moments she should pay attention to what was different about her current relationship – for example that her new partner looked very different to her old partner, to pay attention to differences in how she was being touched, and to remind herself of facts she knew, such as that her new relationship was loving and consensual, that she was in control, and that she was safe now. With practice she found that fewer and fewer things triggered her trauma memories, and that she was able to relax and enjoy herself when she was with her new partner.

Instructions

First a reminder: This exercise is best done in combination with a copy of the 'Stimulus discrimination' worksheet which you can download from Psychology Tools. Make sure that you have a copy in front of you. Pause this recording if you need to get a copy of the worksheet, and feel free to pause it throughout the exercise if you need time to think or to write things down.

Stimulus discrimination is going to help you to break a link between a trigger and your trauma memory. It is best done 'in the moment' – that is, at a time when your trauma memory has been triggered. For the purposes of this 'just learning' audio exercise we will practice by thinking about a recent time when your trauma memory was triggered.

Situation / Trigger

The first step is to think of a trauma memory that you would like to work on. Ideally this should be one that gets triggered relatively often – one that you have fairly regular flashbacks of. Now think about the last time that this memory was triggered:

- Where were you?
- What time of day was it?
- Who were you with?
- What was happening?

I'll give you a few moments to write this down in the 'Situation / Trigger' box.

Similarities

The next step is to notice the similarities between what you were aware of at the time of the trauma ('then') and what you are aware of in the present moment ('now'). As we go along, write these down in the 'similarities' box of the worksheet.

I'll give you some prompts in a moment, but to begin with, just see if you can think of any similarities between your trauma and this recent time when your trauma memory was triggered. I'll give you a few moments to write down some similarities in the similarities box.

Now some prompts. Ask yourself:

- What could you see recently that you could also see at the time of the trauma? Was it dark then and dark now? If it was then write 'dark' in the similarities box.
- Did you feel any of the same feelings you felt at the time of the trauma? If you felt scared at both times then write 'scared' in the similarities box.
- Were you noticing anything that looked, sounded, smelled, tasted, or touched similar to something at the time of the trauma? Write down any similarities in the similarities box.
- What else was similar? Write down any other similarities between then and now.

These similarities you have noticed explain why these triggers can set off your

trauma memories. Your brain notices these similarities and makes the mistake of thinking the trauma is happening again.

Now that you know what cues in your environment are triggering this memory, the next step is to pay attention to the differences between then (the time of the trauma) and now (being safe in the present moment). Again, think back to this recent time when your trauma memory was triggered. This time we're going to pay attention to the differences between then and now. We'll go slowly through all of your senses.

Sight

What's different about what you can see now compared to what you could see at the time of the trauma?

Write down any differences in the 'sight' section of the worksheet. In the 'then' column write what you could see at the time of the trauma. In the 'now' column write what you can see now.

I'll give you a few moments to note down some differences. Feel free to pause the recording if you need more time.

Now some prompts, ask yourself:

- What can you see now that's different from the time of the trauma?
- What is different about the room you are in?
- What is different about the colours you can see?
- What is different about who you can see nearby?

I'll give you some more time to note down some differences.

Sound

What is different about what you can hear now compared to what you could hear at the time of the trauma?

Write down any differences in the 'sound' section of the worksheet. Write trauma sounds in the 'then' column, and sounds you can hear now in the 'now' column.

I'll give you a few moments to note down some differences. Feel free to pause the recording if you need more time.

Now some prompts, ask yourself:

- Is there anything you can hear now that you weren't aware of then?
- Listen carefully for any sounds around you – close by or in the distance – is there anything different now compared to then?

Write down these differences in the 'sound' section of the worksheet.

Smell

What can you smell now that wasn't there at the time?

Write down any differences in the 'smell' section of the worksheet. Write trauma smells in the 'then' column, and smells you can smell now in the 'now' column.

I'll give you a few moments to note down some differences. Feel free to pause the recording if you need more time.

Now some prompts, ask yourself:

- What could you smell then, that isn't there now?
- Feel free to deliberately smell a soothing, reassuring, or grounding smell now that wasn't there at the time.

Write down these differences in the 'smell' section of the worksheet.

Touch

What can you touch now that wasn't there at the time?

Write down any differences in the 'touch' section of the worksheet. In the 'then' column write down things you could touch and feel at the time of the trauma, and in the 'now' column write what you can touch and feel now.

I'll give you a few moments to note down some differences. Feel free to pause the recording if you need more time.

Now some prompts, ask yourself:

- What can you touch now that you couldn't touch then?
- Pay attention to any textures that you couldn't feel then but you can feel now.
- Maybe touch your clothing or objects around you.
- What is the temperature like now compared to then?
- Pay attention to the surface you're sitting or lying on. What's different about how it presses on your body?

Write down any differences on the 'touch' section of the worksheet.

Taste

What can you taste now that is different compared to what you could taste then?

Write down any differences in the 'taste' section of the worksheet. In the 'then' column write down things you could taste at the time of the trauma, and in the 'now' column write what you can taste now.

I'll give you a few moments to note down some differences. Feel free to pause the recording if you need more time.

Now some prompts:

- What can you taste now that you couldn't taste then?
- Even if you weren't aware of any tastes at the time of your trauma, you can accentuate differences by having something to eat or drink now.

Write down any differences on the 'taste' section of the worksheet.

Body

What body feelings do you have now that you didn't have at the time of the trauma? Write down any differences in the 'body' section of the worksheet. In the 'then' column write down body feelings that you had at the time of the trauma. In the 'now' column write what you can feel in your body now. I'll give you a few moments to note down some differences. Feel free to pause the recording if you need more time.

Now some prompts, ask yourself:

- What body feelings did you have then that you can't feel now?
- What parts of your body were you aware of at the time of the trauma? Can you deliberately tune in to any different parts of your body now?

Write down any differences in the body section of the worksheet.

Knowledge

What do you know now that you didn't know at the time of your trauma?

Write down any differences in the 'knowledge' section of the worksheet. In the 'then' column write down things you thought or predicted at the time of the trauma, and in the 'now' column write what you know about those thoughts or predictions now.

I'll give you a few moments to note down some differences. Feel free to pause the recording if you need more time.

Now some prompts, ask yourself:

- What were you thinking at the time of the trauma and did it 100% come true?
- Do you know any reassuring facts about what has happened since?
- If you were worried about dying at the time, then one reassuring fact to remind yourself of is "I survived".
- Has anything positive happened since the trauma that might help to situate the trauma in the past?
- Is there anything that you know now that you couldn't possibly have known then?

Write down any differences in the 'knowledge' section of the worksheet.

Reassurance

Now that you've paid attention to all of the differences between then and now it's time to offer yourself reassurance that you are safe and that the trauma

is over. Imagine a scared version of you who is mistakenly worried that the

trauma is still happening. What would you say to reassure them that everything is alright? What tone of voice would you need to use to be most effective? I'll give you a few moments to write down some reassuring statements. Feel free to pause the recording if you need more time.

Now some prompts:

- If this were somebody else, what would you say to them to reassure them?
- What's the most reassuring fact that you know about your safety now?
- If somebody knew about your trauma, what's the most reassuring thing you could hear from them?
- What can you say to soothe yourself now?

Well done! You have completed a stimulus discrimination exercise.

The same basic technique - paying attention to differences between then and now, and then offering your self reassurance – needs to be rehearsed over and over again for your brain to learn to place the trauma memories in the past. To begin with, it is recommended that you carry some of the worksheets with you, and get into the habit of noticing differences between 'then' and 'now' whenever you have an unwanted memory. Over time you'll find that it becomes more automatic for you to learn to pay attention to the differences – to signs of safety in the present.

Improving your sleep

This set of exercises are about improving your sleep.

Sleep is often one of the biggest things to be disrupted in PTSD. There are so many consequences to getting a poor night's sleep – we feel so much less capable of coping with the world around us when we are exhausted.

You will sleep normally again! Once people have successfully completed a full course of psychological treatment for PTSD most report that their sleep returns to normal.

Sleep is disrupted for a number of reasons when you have PTSD. An obvious disruption is having nightmares about the trauma that are distressing and wake you up. Sometimes these are so distressing that people with PTSD try to avoid going to sleep for fear that they will have a nightmare – but avoiding sleep comes with its own consequences for psychological health. A less obvious way in which PTSD affects sleep is because PTSD affects your 'fight or flight' response. This means that your body's 'alarm system' is on alert after the trauma – you are in a state of heightened alertness ready to respond at a moment's notice to any sign of danger. Essentially this is the core problem of PTSD – the trauma is over but your body is responding as if there were still danger around every corner. And the consequence of being on alert the whole time is that you can't easily relax or get to sleep.

The exercises in this section can't promise to fix all of the problems of sleep, but they can help you to manage and minimise the consequences. Many of our patients have found them helpful.

The exercises in the 'physical soothing' section are an essential part of improving sleep. If you use the relaxed breathing and muscle relaxation exercises regularly they can bring down your general level of alertness and make it easier to relax and get to sleep. If you haven't already practised those then do try to make them a regular part of your routine.

The exercises in the rest of this section are specifically for improving the quality of your sleep. They are:

- Sleep hygiene
- Recovering from a nightmare (grounding statement)
- Nightmare rescripting

Sleep hygiene

This is not an exercise, but will give you information on what sleep specialists think are important factors in getting a good night's sleep.

For very good reasons people with PTSD often get into very bad sleep habits – sleeping on the couch with the television on, staying awake all night and only sleeping when day breaks, or using alcohol or drugs to sleep.

Here are some do's and don'ts recommended by sleep specialists.

First the "Don'ts"

- Don't use alcohol or non-prescription drugs to get to sleep. Although they sometimes help people get to sleep, typically, the quality of sleep you have when drinking or using drugs is poor – your body and mind will not feel rested. Drink and drugs come with other harmful consequences too, and it is relatively easy to become dependent.
- Don't try to avoid sleep. Try your best to stick to a regular routine. It is better to get regularly interrupted sleep than for your sleep pattern to become haywire.

Now the "Do's"

- Do exercise regularly. There is good evidence that symptoms of PTSD can be dramatically reduced with regular cardiovascular exercise. This is exercise that gets your heart beating - it helps your body to burn off some of the excess adrenaline. If you exercise regularly you will be more tired and more likely to get sleep. Research with people with PTSD has shown that 30 minute sessions of activity a few times a week is best - but any exercise is better than nothing.
- Do make sure that your bedroom feels comfortable and safe. Make it an attractive place to be.
- Do try to stick to regular bedtime routine. Try to eat at a regular time in the evening, then before you go to bed have a soothing routine that tells your body and mind that it is bedtime. Some people find that a shower or bath before bedtime is helpful.
- Do reduce your caffeine intake. Caffeine is a stimulant that will interfere with your sleep. Although it can act as a 'pick me up' in the short-term our body soon adjusts to it. It is better to cut out any stimulants that interfere with our sleep. Switch to decaf tea or coffee.

Recovering from a nightmare

Many people with PTSD have frequent nightmares. These may be of things that actually happened to you, or anxiety dreams about things that could happen. It is common to awake from nightmares feeling distressed and disoriented. Some people report that they are not sure where they are, or whether the trauma is happening again right at that moment. Obviously this can feel terrifying.

In the long run the best way of reducing nightmares in PTSD is to complete a form of treatment that involves ‘reprocessing’ your trauma memories. There is good evidence that trauma-focused CBT and EMDR are effective for doing this. However, in the short term you need to manage the nightmares as best you can.

There are a number of things you can do to help yourself recover from a nightmare. The first step is to reduce any sense of disorientation. The second step is to reduce your sense of threat.

To reduce any sense of disorientation

- You need to remind yourself ‘where’ and ‘when’ you are right at that moment when you wake up. Your memories may be tricking you into thinking you are somewhere else in the past – you need to remind yourself that you are safe in your bedroom, or wherever you are, in the present moment.
- You can use sensory grounding such as splashing your face with cold water or using a soothing smell – anything which brings your attention back to the present moment.

To reduce your sense of threat

- You need to remind yourself that you are safe now. It is often helpful to find a way to ‘prove’ this to yourself – for example, remind yourself of pre-prepared reasons why you are safe now, or remind yourself of good things that have happened since the trauma which remind you that the trauma is over.
- To reduce your sense of threat you can use exercises to physiologically soothe yourself such as relaxed breathing, muscle relaxation, or peaceful imagery.

Instructions for preparation

Waking up from a nightmare isn’t an exercise we can practice easily. What we can do, though, is prepare.

First I want you to write down some reasons why you know you are safe now.

Pause this recording if you need to find a pen and paper to make some notes.

First write some information that will reduce any disorientation. This needs to be information about ‘where’ and ‘when’ you live now. For example:

- “I live at 32 Hilltop Road”
- “I live on my own – nobody can hurt me” or
- “I live with my family”
- “The year is 2017”
- “I was just having a nightmare – a memory from the past – I am safe in the present moment now”

Pause this recording if you want to make some notes

Now write down some reminders to yourself about what sensory grounding strategies will work for you if you wake from a nightmare. These might be:

- Keeping a bowl of water by the bed to splash your face
- Having your grounding smell nearby to focus your attention on the here-and-now
- Keeping a glass of water close to hand
- Opening a window to get some fresh air

Pause this recording if you want to make some notes

Next, write down some statements you can say to yourself that will calm you down if you wake from a nightmare. These might include:

- Facts you know about memory in PTSD like “The nightmares are just memories from the past – I am safe now”.
- Facts you know about the trauma and whether it is over, like “The trauma happened ten years ago – I know that I am safe now”.
- Ways you can ‘prove’ to yourself that the trauma is over, like “I know the trauma is over because my daughter is 5 now, and she wasn’t even born when it happened”.
- Think about what a good friend would say to you now if they knew you were upset or anxious – would they agree that you need to be this scared?

Pause this recording if you want to make some notes.

Finally, write down some soothing exercises that you could try to calm your fight-or-flight response. These might include:

- Relaxed breathing exercises
- Muscle relaxation exercises
- A peaceful place exercise
- Making yourself a warm drink
- Reading something comforting

Pause this recording if you want to make some notes

Now that you have some strategies that you can use, the important thing is to make them easily accessible when you wake up, distressed, in the middle of the night. Some good options include:

- Make a flashcard with all of the important statements written on it – and keeping it on your bedside table.
- Keeping some grounding smells or objects next to your bed.
- Making an audio recording of you reading through some of the notes you have just made – and making sure this is to hand when you wake up.

Nightmare rescripting

Nightmares are trauma memories that play in your mind while you sleep. Nightmare rescripting is a 'brain retraining' exercise. It will take repeated practice but many people with PTSD have found it an excellent way to stop nightmares. It tends to work best when you have a similar nightmare over and over again.

One theory about why nightmares happen is that your brain is trying to 'process' and store the trauma memory while you sleep. When you get to the most distressing part it becomes overwhelmed and the process gets interrupted. The same thing happens the next night, and the next. The goal of nightmare rescripting is to process the memories and stop the nightmares.

A helpful theory for understanding why nightmare rescripting works is called 'retrieval competition'. The idea is to create a new 'rescripted' version of the nightmare. The old 'nightmare memory' will still be in your mind, but if the new rescripted version is memorable enough then when your brain chooses to 'play' one of the scripts at night then it will choose to play the new one instead of the old one. This allows for the processing of the trauma memory and eventually your brain learns to stop having the nightmare.

Some examples might be useful here:

- One client, whose trauma was that she had been hurt by someone close to her, worked to change the end of her worst trauma. She had 'helpers' come in to rescue her, and 'deal with' the person who hurt her.
- Another client changed the ending of her trauma so that her quick-thinking actions averted a disaster.

What it is

- A technique that tends to work best with repeated nightmares – ones where you have the same nightmare over and over, or ones where the theme is the same (for example bad dreams where you always get hurt).

What it is not

- Nightmare rescripting is not just about imaging nice things. The new script has to be close enough to the old memory to overlap – you can't just say *"I wish the trauma never happened"*

Instructions

First a reminder: This exercise is best done in combination with a copy of the 'Nightmare rescripting' worksheet which you can download from Psychology Tools. Make sure that you have a copy in front of you. Pause this recording if you need to get a copy of the worksheet.

This audio recording will guide you through the Nightmare rescripting worksheet. You will be asked to do a fair amount of writing, so be prepared to pause the recording at regular intervals.

Step 1

With the worksheet in front of you, the first step is to identify the repeated nightmare that you have.

- Write a title to describe the nightmare, for example "The one where I am trapped in a building and know I've got to get out" or "The one where the monster with no face is chasing me"
- If you don't have an identical nightmare, is there one where the theme is the same? Being chased, or trapped are common themes.

Pause the recording and write down some quick notes about the nightmare you want to work on.

Step 2

The next step is to write down the 'script' for the nightmare as it current runs. Imagine you're a Hollywood script writer and you're writing your story.

- Where is it set?
- Who is in it?
- Where does it begin?
- What happens next?
- And next?
- How does it end?

Pause the recording and take your time to write down the script of your nightmare as it is now. Take as long as you need.

Step 3

The next step is to identify the worst point, and to write down how the nightmare makes you feel at that moment.

- Is it the moment where the fear turns to terror?
- Is it a moment that is very disgusting?
- Is it a moment where you feel humiliated?
- Did you feel very powerless and helpless?

Pause the recording and take a moment to describe the worst emotion as clearly as you can.

Step 4

Now, here is where we start to get creative. Thinking about the worst moment that you have just identified. Think about how you would prefer to feel in that moment.

Thinking about opposites can help sometimes:

- If you felt powerless, would you prefer to feel powerful?
- If you felt ashamed, would you prefer to feel connected to people?
- If you felt disgusted, would you prefer to feel clean?

It doesn't matter that it didn't really happen – just go with it

Pause the recording and take a moment to write down how you would prefer to feel at that moment.

Step 5

Now we get to the part where you need to get creative. You are going to rewrite the script of the nightmare, but before it gets to the worst moment you are going to change what happens so that you end up feeling the feeling you identified in step 4.

- Be as creative as you can be.
- Don't be limited to real-world events – you can have super powers, you can

have famous characters from fiction, absolutely anything can happen.

- The main thing is that events have to unfold so that the worst bit of the trauma doesn't happen, and you end up feeling how you want to feel.

Pause this recording and really take your time to write the new script for your nightmare.

Step 6

Now that you have a new script for your nightmare with a changed ending you need to practice it until your brain has learned it. This means that you need to read it multiple times per day. Read it out loud. Make a recording of you reading it and listen to the recording. Try and imagine the new ending as clearly as you can. By doing this you are creating a new memory.

There's no time like the present. Pause this recording now and read the new script back to yourself.

Once you have practiced all of the exercises in this pack you can consider trying this 'advanced skills' section. These are not new exercises, just instructions to practice skills you already have, in different ways, to get more benefits.

Advanced skills

Testing the effectiveness of your grounding techniques

Grounding techniques are fantastic for bringing your attention back to the present moment. Once you have learned some grounding techniques and have used them successfully, then you will feel more confident in being able to cope when you do experience intrusive symptoms of PTSD. When psychologists treat people with PTSD they will often practise grounding techniques early in therapy. They do this to help their clients to increase the range of uncomfortable emotion that they can tolerate. This is sometimes called ‘widening the window of tolerance’. Once clients are able to tolerate some uncomfortable emotion then they are able to move on to later stages of therapy work – for example starting to approach trauma memories.

Once you have practiced basic grounding techniques a good way to increase your sense of confidence is to use them to help you approach your traumatic memories. This advanced exercise will involve thinking a little about your trauma, so only do it when you are feeling ready.

Instructions

This advanced exercise is going to involve thinking a little about the trauma you have experienced. The aim of this is to cause a physiological response in your body. We will then use a grounding strategy to bring your attention fully back to the present moment where you are safe.

The aim of the exercise is not to spend a long time thinking about the trauma, but simply to use it as a way of bringing about a physical and emotional response, and then to calm that response by using a grounding strategy.

Exercise

Notice how you are feeling at the start of this exercise. This is your baseline.

Now spend just a few seconds thinking about the trauma you experienced:

- Think about what happened, and how you felt.
- Notice what you feel in your body as you think about this upsetting moment from the past
- Do you feel tense?
- Does anywhere feel tight?
- Notice what emotions you feel

Now let's use a sensory grounding technique.

Begin by focusing your attention on five things you can see around you – say the names out loud or in your head.

Now focus on four things you can touch ... maybe your own clothing ... or objects that are nearby ... feel free to run your fingers along them – really notice any textures - say the names out loud or in your head.

Next focus your attention on three things you can hear around you – say the names out loud or in your head.

Now focus on two things you can smell ... if there is not much to hand then try smelling your own clothing ... maybe you can smell fabric detergent – say the names out loud or in your head.

Lastly focus on one things you can taste ... take a drink if you have one to hand ... remember the absence of taste can also be a taste – say the name out loud or in your head.

Now turn your attention to where you are right now ... notice your surroundings and remind yourself where you are ... remind yourself of the current date and time ... and remind yourself that you are safe now.

How do you feel now? Feel free to go through your senses again until you feel settled. You can use exercises like this to start approaching your trauma memory for small amounts at a time.

Advanced stimulus discrimination

Stimulus discrimination is a technique to help your brain to re-learn the difference between the present moment and trauma memories from the past. It is often practised early on in the treatment of PTSD to help you to work out what your triggers are, and to make them less triggering.

Once you feel comfortable with the basic stimulus discrimination exercise you can advance your practice by deliberately bringing parts of your trauma memory to mind at different times of the day. When you do this, you should then pay attention to differences between 'then' and 'now'.

You can even ramp up the difficulty by starting to approach things that might have, in the past, triggered your trauma memories. For example by watching tv programmes that you might previously have avoided. In this way you can start to reclaim situations in your life that your PTSD has taken from you. Again, when you approach things that were previously triggers, you should deliberately pay attention to what is different between the present moment – now - and the time of the trauma – then.

