

Mind-Body Therapies

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Relaxation Training

The most widely used mind-body technique is relaxation therapy, which reduces distressing emotions. A relaxation procedure is common to most mind-body therapies, including guided and interactive imagery, meditation, hypnosis, and biofeedback. The most frequently used and researched technique is progressive muscle relaxation where people systematically imagine the various muscles of the body relaxed from head to toe. Deep breathing is common, also, where people simply concentrate on long breaths in and out. This “being in the moment” keeps one from fixating on worries, and creates a relaxed state, which is the opposite of the stress response (Pelletier).

Guided Imagery:

Guided imagery is a form of mental rehearsal. It is the mental picturing, or sensing, thinking and feeling of a desired outcome. In the same way that one can learn something by practicing or observing, you can learn by modeling or imitating this behavior or outcome through thought and imagination. It's like day dreaming on purpose: imagining yourself in a place where you feel comfortable, cared for, and safe, then visualizing what it is that you want. Then because the brain does not differentiate between fantasy and reality, the body responds (like a placebo response) as though this actually were true, and begins to relax and allow for a natural healing response.

Interactive imagery:

Interactive imagery is the inviting and allowing of a creative flow of images, feelings or thoughts to come into your conscious awareness. This is an unconscious process such as dreaming, where your subconscious communicates with the conscious mind giving insights for healing. You can learn to do this for yourself, but it is advisable to work with an experienced practitioner to help elicit this subconscious information.

Carl Jung developed a similar approach he called Active Imagination, where you consciously dialogue with images and parts of yourself that live in the unconscious, such as you could do in lucid dreaming. Images come to you as they would in a dream if you were asleep, except that you are awake and fully conscious during the experience.

Meditation:

Meditation is a gentle narrowing and focusing of one's attention on a neutral or meaningful subject, such as paying attention to your breathing or a personal affirmation. Its intention is to withdraw one's senses from the outer world, and to still or quiet the mind. In “mindfulness” mediation you simply pay attention to whatever thoughts, images, or feelings come into your awareness in a passive, non-judgmental way. This allows for refocusing one's attention on something other than habitual worries or fears. It is especially effective at restoring internal coherence and inner peace.

Hypnosis:

Hypnosis is a state of highly focused, selective attention. In this altered state of consciousness, people are hyper-suggestible based on their acceptance and expectations of information presented while in this state of focused concentration. Hypnosis can be self-directed (autosuggestion), but an experienced, trained hypnotist is recommended for therapeutic work.

Biofeedback:

Biofeedback uses sophisticated, sensitive physiologic monitors to amplify the reactions your body is having in response to your thoughts (Rossman). Most commonly, biofeedback involves measuring brain waves, muscle tension, skin temperature, electrical resistance of the skin, and respiration (Pelletier). Biofeedback is essentially the use of a relaxation procedure with instrumentation to measure the biological response of the relaxation exercise. Since feedback is essential in learning and mastering any skill, biofeedback demonstrates to the patient that the relaxation technique is working, and builds confidence in one's own ability to reduce a stress response (Shrock).

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy:

Cognitive behavioral therapy is a traditional psychological intervention that attempts to alter one's behavior and emotions by assessing and restructuring one's beliefs, expectations, and fears (Lerner). One can learn to identify stress triggers, and respond to them actively to achieve a more relaxed state and influence a desired outcome (Pelletier). This therapy approach normally would be applied by a licensed mental health professional.

Psychoeducational Programs:

Psychoeducational programs usually incorporate the basic principles of mind-body medicine: how mind and body are interrelated, and how stress and one's thoughts and emotional states affect health. These programs also include learning various relaxation approaches, and related information about coping with disorders/disease, treatments, side effects, wellness, self-esteem, communication skills, social support, and learning to live life fully despite the medical diagnosis. Variations of these programs often are offered by nursing as an adjunct to medical care.

Social Support:

The support of family, friends, and formal support groups can be very important. Having people around who care for you, will fight for you, will research for you, and be there when you need to grieve or have company is a big help. Patients need to meet their needs as well as keep at bay those who would drain their energy and resources. The important thing is to know what is genuinely supportive for the patient, and to be able to ask for the support needed (Rossman). When people feel listened to, cared for, and supported, it can have profound healing effects (Shrock, Ornish, Spiegel).