

Therapeutic Interventions for Anxiety-Related Problems  
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When dealing with the anxiety, I would start by working with a technique called counterconditioning. The principle behind counterconditioning is that anxiety (or stress) is a high arousal condition, and as such, cannot co-exist in a person at the same time as a state of low arousal condition such as relaxation. The key in this technique is for people to develop and strengthen their relaxation response enough so that when they initiate relaxation, it in a sense, overcomes the anxiety. To develop and strengthen the relaxation response, I would have the person focus first just on deep, diaphragmatic breathing. Lots of us don't realize how relaxing this can be, and these deep breaths can also serve later as cues for becoming more deeply relaxed. Next, I would teach them the two main principles for an effective relaxation response: (1) a specific focus, and (2) avoiding or dismissing distractions. The focus could be on the deep breathing, or it could be on a short word or phrase. If you have done much meditation, this will sound familiar, unless you have done the kind of relaxation which deliberately avoids focus (I forget what that kind is called). Avoiding or dismissing distractions basically involves consciously coming back to your focus when distracted during relaxation. Pretty simple stuff, really.

The nice thing I teach about relaxation (which has good research support) is: (1) it is an improvable skill, and (2) it is generalizable. The first thing about being improvable is basically just like exercising a muscle -- the more you do it, the stronger it gets. People won't succeed in anxiety, stress, or anger reduction (anger, of course, is also a high arousal condition which is amenable to improvement by counterconditioning) without having sufficient motivation to practice this consistently to get a strong relaxation response. The second thing about generalizability is interesting. Of course, most people report feeling more relaxed when practicing the relaxation response (I usually ask people to practice a relaxation response for 30-45 minutes each day), but the nice thing shown by research is that as people consistently practice relaxation, they also report feeling more relaxed all through their day and not just while they are practicing the relaxation response. So the relaxation response begins to generalize to other parts of a person's day (other than when they consciously and deliberately practice it).

Once people have practiced the relaxation response a good bit, I have them practice imagining facing their arousal producing event (e.g., giving a new product presentation at a trade show). As they imagine the anxiety-producing event, I have them notice the first moment that they begin to feel anxious. People typically initially notice anxiety/stress in one of three ways: (1) physiologically (e.g., sweaty palms, shakes, rapid breathing), (2) cognitively (e.g., "These people are going to think I don't know what I'm doing." "They are never going to buy this product." "I'm such a poser!"), or (3) behaviorally (e.g., cracking knuckles, drumming fingers on table). When imagining a typically stressful event, at the first sign of stress/anxiety, they then immediately introduce the relaxation response (this is where some kind of cue such as a deep breath can be helpful). Practicing this, even when just imagining it, has been shown to improve the ability to relax when in the real situation.

I mentioned that working with relaxation response was the first main thing to target in anxiety/stress linked problems. The other thing to target is the maladaptive thoughts which can often (but not always) underlie the anxiety response. I am attaching a handout which won't make much sense probably, but it lists the main types of maladaptive thinking patterns, a.k.a., cognitive distortions, which I discuss with people. The book referenced on that handout by McKay and Fanning has a bad title ("Self Esteem) but is actually a pretty good self help text for people to work on reducing their cognitive distortions (they call this type of thinking the "Pathological Critic"). Basically, the idea here is to identify and dispute the types of thinking that serve to increase our arousal level and interfere with our most effective performance. I describe these types of thinking of ways of "stirring the pot" or "fanning the flames of the fire" which make our reaction to situations, like public speaking, worse. You'll notice when I described the three main ways above that people identify their anxiety/stress that one of the ways was cognitive. For some people, they first notice anxiety by these types of cognitive distortions or maladaptive thinking that goes off in their mind (or sometimes out loud). These cognitive distortions don't have to be the first sign of stress to be maladaptive, they can still interfere with our responses when they come later in the stress process.