

## 7.9 Stress reduction, relaxation and grounding techniques

### Objective

To understand and role play stress reduction and relaxation techniques

### Time

15 minutes

### Resources needed

- Print out of the Relaxation and grounding techniques

### Instructions for facilitators

Choose one or two of the following relaxation or grounding techniques, read them out and encourage all participants to participate.

### Relaxation and grounding techniques

#### ***Breathing Exercise***

- Sit comfortably. Shake your arms and legs and let them go loose. Roll your shoulders back and move your head from side to side.
- Sit with your feet flat on the floor. Put your hands in your lap.
- Take 10 slow, deep breaths from your belly. Slowly breathe in slowly and deeply through your nose, and feel your belly fill up like a balloon. Place their hand on their belly to feel it expand. Breathe out all the air through your mouth, and feel your belly flatten. If they cannot breathe from their belly easily, then they can breathe from their chest. Have them place their hand on their belly/chest to feel it expand and contract.
- Breathe deeply and slowly. You can count 1–2–3 on each breath in and 1–2–3 on each breath out. You can then try to breathe in while counting 1-2-3-4-5. 2. Hold your breath for 1-2-3-4-5. Breathe out slowly 1-2-3-4-5.
- As you breathe, feel the tension leave your body.

#### ***Square-breathing***

- Sit comfortably. Lower your shoulders.
- Look at a square, or visualise one with your eyes closed.
- Breathe in while counting to 4. Let your eyes wander up the left side of the square.
- Hold your breath while counting to 4. Let your eyes run across the top of the square.
- Breathe out while counting to 4. Let your eyes run down the right side of the square.
- Hold your breath while counting to 4. Let your eyes run along the bottom of the square.
- Repeat 4 times.

#### ***Imagination-Visualisation Exercise***

Instruct everyone to get comfortable in their seat. Close their eyes or keep their eyes open but soften their gaze and focus on one location in the room that is unmoving (e.g., the wall, the

floor, etc.). Explain to participants that sometimes when people have experienced trauma in their lives that they might not feel safe to close their eyes. Play calm relaxing music and dim/turn off the lights.

Read the following text:

*Become aware of your breathing ... allow your breathing to gradually slow down ... breathe in and breathe out ... breathe in and breathe out... Now breathe deeply and imagine that you are leaving the building to travel to another place, a place of calm.*

*Imagine what you see as you leave the building and begin your journey... Decide in your imagination: How do you choose to travel? Are you walking, taking a bus, flying? Is your way through a town...? or are you leaving town passing through the countryside...*

*Notice what is under your feet as you make this journey... What kind of day is it? Is it warm, cool, windy or rainy? Now, up ahead, you see your destination, a place of calmness... Imagine what is it like when you approach this place?*

*You have arrived at last. Imagine what is your place of calmness like? Is it a building? Is it outdoors? Look at this place. What do you see around you? Beneath you? Above you? When you stretch out your hands, what do you touch? Make yourself comfortable here. Imagine if you are sitting, standing or lying down?*

*Do you hear any sounds in this place of calmness? Birds, ocean waves, music...or is it quiet? What does it smell like in this place of calmness? Are you alone in this place, or are there other people with you? Who? If you want to invite someone to join you, do it now. Take another minute to enjoy this place where you can feel very calm. Now the time has come for you to leave this place, but remember, it will always be there, you can always come back to it if you want to. So, take one last look around and now start to leave. Go back the way you came, retracing all the parts of your journey. Walk, ride or fly, back across the countryside, or through the town, until you find your way back to this room and to your place in this room, and when you are ready, slowly open your eyes.*

### ***Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)***

Whenever you become anxious, your body tenses. This can generate symptoms of pain in the shoulders, neck or back, or tension in the jaw, arms or legs. To train yourself to progressively release this tension, start by intentionally tensing specific groups of muscles, and relaxing them. Focus on the difference of feeling between the tense and relaxed state of the muscles

- Now that you are ready to begin, get your body into a comfortable position in which you can relax. Loosen tight clothing. Lie or sit down, with all body parts uncrossed and no body part supporting any others.
- For each area of the body listed below, gather tension by tightening muscles. Focus on the sensation of tightness in and around that area. Hold the tension as you inhale for 5–6

seconds, then release and breathe out. As you release, say in your mind very slowly the word “Relax.”

- Notice the difference between the tense and released states, observe the changes in sensations as you relax for 10–15 seconds then move on to the next muscle:
  - Hands and wrists: Make fists with both hands, pull fists up on the wrists. Hold and release.
  - Lower and upper arms: Make fists, bend both arms up to touch shoulders. Hold and release.
  - Shoulders: Pull both shoulders up to your ears. Hold and release.
  - Forehead: Pull eyebrows close together, wrinkling forehead. Hold and release.
  - Eyes: Shut eyes tightly. Hold and release.
  - Nose and upper cheeks: Scrunch up nose; bring upper lips and cheeks up toward eyes. Hold and release.
  - Lips and lower face: Press lips together; bring edges of lips toward ears. Hold and release.
  - Tongue and mouth: Hold your teeth together; tongue pushing on upper mouth. Hold and release.
  - Neck: Push head back into chair, floor, or bed, or push chin down to chest. Hold and release. Bend your neck so that your chin touches your chest, turn your head slowly to the left, bring it back to the centre, bend it back, bring it back to the centre, turn it to the right, bring it back to the centre. Repeat slowly since there is often a lot of tension in this area.
  - Chest: Take deep breath and hold it. Release.
  - Focus on your shoulders. Lift them. Hold and notice the tension. Release.
  - Stomach: Take a deep breath and hold your stomach in tightly. Release.
  - Buttocks: Tighten and squeeze buttocks together. Release.
  - Upper legs and thighs: Stretch your legs out; tense your thighs. Release.
  - Calves: Stretch your legs out; point toes down. Release.
  - Ankles: Stretch your legs out; point your heels down, toes towards the sky. Release.
- Practice tensing your entire body at once. When you tense your entire body, you are like a robot – stiff, nothing moving. When you relax your entire body, you are like a rag doll – all muscles drooping down.

### ***Centring Exercise***

This can be used when we need to feel more connected to ourselves when feeling distressed or thrown off balance. Your physical centre of gravity is a few inches below the belly button, so self-touch can really help bring you back to yourself.

- Place one hand on your lower belly and one on your heart. Or try both on your heart or both on your lower belly. Notice which feels best for you.
- Close your eyes for a moment if you're comfortable
- Notice the temperature under your hands, and notice line of energy between the hands at core of your body that helps you elongate

- From the centre of your body, notice the width of your body, to the right side body, the left side body, front body and back. Notice your right to take up space.
- Stay here for as long as you need. Open your eyes. Remind yourself that you are not alone in feeling thrown off balance at times.

### ***Body Hold Exercise***

This can be used to reduce high activation in the body.

- Sit on a chair with your ankles crossed
- Place hands under opposite armpits
- Drop chin to chest and slow down your breathing. Keep your eyes open or closed, whichever feels best.
- Notice how in this position you can keep out what you don't want in, keep in what you don't want out.
- Stay here for at least 30 seconds until you notice a shift (e.g., yawn, swallow, sigh, deep breath, shoulders drop, any relaxing or expansion in the body).

### ***Containment Exercise:***

Wrap yourself in a blanket, towel or scarf. Pull it tight so it feels good to you and feel as though you are being swaddled like a baby and very snug. Rock back and forth or side to side, if it feels good. Stay here for as long as you need.

### ***Grounding techniques***

Grounding techniques are ways to help us to find inner calm through 'anchoring' or connecting us to the present and to reality. When survivors are overwhelmed, they may disconnect from reality in an attempt to gain control over their feelings and stay safe. Grounding is not the same as relaxation techniques. Grounding is much more active, focuses on strategies to bring a survivor to the present moment.

### ***Five Senses Exercise***

- Name 5 things you can see.
- Name 4 things you can touch (e.g., textures, objects, the chair, clothes)
- Name 3 things you can hear
- Name 2 things you can smell
- Name 1 thing you can taste

### ***Sitting Grounding Exercise***

Sit on your chair. Feel your feet touching the ground. Stamp your left foot into the ground, then your right. Do it slowly: left, right, left. Do this several times.

Feel your thighs and buttocks in contact with the seat of your chair (5 seconds). Notice if your legs and buttocks now feel more present or less present than when you started focusing on your legs.

Now move your focus to your spine. Feel your spine as your midline. Slowly lengthen your spine and notice if it affects your breath (10 seconds).

Move your focus toward your hands and arms. Put your hands together. Do it in a way that feels comfortable for you. Push your hands together and feel your strength and temperature. Release and pause, then push your hands together again. Release and rest your arms. Now move your focus to your eyes. Look around the room. Find something that tells you that you are here. Remind yourself that you are here, now, and that you are safe. Notice how this exercise affects your breathing, your presence, your mood, and your strength.

### ***Re-orienting to the present***

This exercise is of help to survivors in 'freeze-mode', who feel numbed and frozen. This can help to be fully in the present and feel safe.

- Look round you and name 3 things you see.
- Look at something (an object, a colour, etc.)
- Tell yourself what you are seeing.
- Name 3 things you hear.
- Listen to a sound (music, voices, other sounds).
- Tell yourself what you are hearing.
- Name 3 things you touch.
- Touch something (different textures, different objects).
- Tell yourself what you are touching.

### **Discussion**

Ask:

- How do you feel and how does your body feel? What changes did you notice? Did you feel calmer or relaxed?
- How and when can you use this relaxation in everyday life?
- How do you think this could help survivors who are feeling panic, worry or distress?

### **Key messages**

Stress reduction and relaxation techniques can be used together with survivors in moments of distress to help bring them back into the present and their body, to have a sense of control.

*Adapted from WHO (2014) Clinical handbook Health care for women subjected to intimate partner violence or sexual violence, NCA (2020) Integrating Therapeutic Interventions into Gender-based Violence Case Management, and HHRI 2014 Mental health and gender-based violence Helping survivors of sexual violence in conflict – a training manual.*