

# Arousal Reduction

## Action 5: Arousal Reduction: ADULT VERSION

### *Explain Rationale for Arousal Reduction*

<b>Rationale</b>	<p>“Those affected by disaster and its aftermath may have had very stressful experiences and may be faced with many challenges. Recovering from disaster is inherently stressful, although initially, many feel a sense of relief.</p> <p>People who have been exposed to extreme stress and fear as a result of disaster have bodies that are often on alert ready for danger. Relaxing the body can then feel like one is making oneself more vulnerable. In the absence of real danger, this anxiety is unnecessary, and may have bad effects on one’s health.</p> <p>Stress and anxiety can predispose people to illness. They can cause headaches, appetite disturbance, exacerbation of pain problems, sleep disturbance, and high blood pressure. They can also predispose one to social problems like violence and alcohol abuse.</p> <p>Two ways that people can help to better manage their anxiety are by using breathing and muscle relaxation techniques.”</p>
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### *Explain Skill of Breathing*

<b>Explain Skill of Breathing</b>	<p>“I’m going to teach you some specific skills you can use to help minimize the negative effects of anxiety. Because these are skills you will have to learn, it is important to remember that it will take time to learn to use them effectively. Think of these skills like you would any other skill (like riding a bike). It takes time to master, but once you learn it, it becomes quite easy to do. In order to do this, it is necessary that you practice such skills on a regular basis, particularly right after you learn them.”</p> <p>“When we get anxious, our body responds by changing the way we breathe. We tend to breathe faster and shallower when we experience anxiety. This is an important point because breathing helps us regulate different gases in our body that are necessary for healthy functioning. There is always a balance between the level of oxygen and carbon dioxide in our body. When we get anxious, our breathing changes in such a way that this balance is upset. When this balance is upset, it causes us to feel even more of the physical reactions of anxiety. Thus, the way we breathe when we get upset can be extremely important in managing our anxiety and preventing it from getting worse.”</p> <p>First you will learn a technique called breathing retraining. It’s very common for people who have experienced a disaster to have physical tension and anxiety. Breathing retraining is simply a particular style of breathing that can help reduce physical tension and anxious feelings. I want to teach you this now so you can begin using it right away.”</p>
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	<p>"Before I teach you this skill, I'm wondering if you've ever learned any relaxation techniques before?"</p> <p><i>If yes:</i> "What have you learned and have they helped?" (<i>Engage in brief discussion.</i>) "OK, I am still going to teach you this skill (or let's review this skill to see if it could work in this situation). I will check in regularly and see how it's working for you."</p> <p><i>If no:</i> "Ok. Then this will be something new for you. Hopefully you'll find this new way of breathing useful."</p> <p>"Most of us realize that our breathing affects the way we feel. For example, many people believe that taking a deep breath helps them calm down when they are stressed out or anxious. However, contrary to popular belief, taking a deep breath usually isn't helpful and can actually lead to even more feelings of anxiety. The best way to cope with anxiety is actually to take a normal breath and exhale slowly. While you exhale, try saying the word CALM or RELAX very slowly to yourself, like this, C-a-a-a-a-l-m. It is also fine to use some other word of your choosing."</p>
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When suggesting a cue word for relaxation, inquire if the survivor has a preference for a specific word. Most people find the words "calm" or "relax" helpful. Check with the survivor that this word is comfortable; occasionally a survivor may report that the word "relax" is actually a cue for arousal. If this is the case, select another cue word such as "exhale."

**Model, then Coach, Inhalation and Exhalation.** First, model for the survivor how to inhale and exhale through the nose and then ask the survivor to perform the exercise according to the following instructions.

<b>Model and Coach</b>	<p>"In addition to concentrating on slowly exhaling while saying 'calm' to yourself, I want you to slow down your breathing. Very often, when people become frightened or upset, they feel like they need more air and may hyperventilate in response to that feeling. Hyperventilation, which simply refers to breathing in excess oxygen, does not have a calming effect. In fact, it causes anxious feelings. Unfortunately, when we are under stress, many of us hyperventilate without even realizing it. Unless we are preparing for a really dangerous situation, we often don't need as much air as we are taking in. When we hyperventilate and take in more air, it tells our bodies to prepare for danger. If we feel anxious and want to calm down, what we really need to do is to slow down our breathing and take in less air."</p>
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Instruct the survivor to take a normal breath and exhale very slowly while silently repeating the cue word. Train the survivor to pause and count to four before taking the next breath. Repeat the entire sequence 10 to 15 times in the contact. Discuss with survivor and problem-solve any issues that arise.

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**Recommend Daily Practice.** Ask the survivor to practice this exercise every day. Emphasize the fact that practicing the skill on a regular basis when not distressed (such as first thing in the morning) will help him/her learn the skill better. Then, he/she will be able to use it better in times when it is really needed. Be specific with the survivor when discussing times and places where the exercise will be most useful.

## *Explain Skill of Muscle Relaxation*

It is important to educate the survivor about muscle tension and anxiety. When a person experiences the stress/anxiety response, his/her muscles tighten to prepare you for danger. When this response is unnecessary and the muscles maintain their tension, waste products build up in the muscle, causing muscle pain. Techniques that relax muscle tension can minimize the physical effects of anxiety.

<b>Explain Skill</b>	"In addition to changing our breathing patterns, we often react to anxiety by "tensing up" our muscles. Such muscle tension can lead to things like headaches, increase in back pain, and other physical complaints. Therefore, in addition to regulating our breathing, we can counteract the negative effects of anxiety by learning to identify when our muscles are tense and subsequently letting them relax. The following is a set of exercises that will teach the correct postures for insuring that your various muscle groups are maximally relaxed. As with the breathing exercises, you can practice these exercises just about anywhere, which makes them a very effective tool."
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## *Conduct Muscle Relaxation Exercise*

(Give handout "Muscle Relaxation Exercises")

# Arousal Reduction

## Conduct Muscle Relaxation Exercise

"When you experience anxiety, your muscles tighten to prepare you for danger. When this response is unnecessary and your muscles maintain their tension, waste products build up in the muscle, causing muscle pain. The pain is released when the muscle is relaxed. The following exercise will help you to recognize when you are holding tension in your muscles and also how to get rid of that tension. *(The following exercises have been adapted from Poppen, 1988).*

**HANDS:** *The first relaxed posture is called Hands. Look at your hands. Your hands are relaxed when you rest them on your lap in a slightly open position (demonstrate). Please show me relaxed hands. (Make sure that the survivor has his/her hands in the correct position). Now continue to relax for a few minutes and notice how your hands and arms feel in this position.*

**FEET:** *The next relaxed body posture is called Feet. Take a moment and look at your feet. Your feet are relaxed when both heels are resting on the floor like this (demonstrate). Your feet are not relaxed if they are crossed. Please show me relaxed feet. (Make sure that the survivor has his/her feet in the correct position). Just continue to relax your feet and notice the feelings in your legs and feet as you do so.*

**BODY:** *The next relaxed body posture is called Body. Feel how your body is positioned in your chair. Your body is relaxed when your chest and hips are straight in the chair with no movement (demonstrate). Your body is not relaxed if your torso is crooked. Please show me a relaxed torso. (Make sure that the survivor has his/her body in the correct position). Now take a few moments to notice the sensations as you relax your body.*

**SHOULDERS:** *The next relaxed body posture is called Shoulders. Shake out your shoulders. Your shoulders are relaxed when your chest and hips are straight in the chair with no movement (demonstrate). If your shoulders are crooked, your body is not relaxed. (Make sure that the survivor has his/her shoulders in the correct position). Now take a few moments to notice the sensations as you relax your shoulders.*

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<b>Conduct Muscle Relaxation Exercise - continued</b>	<p><b>HEAD:</b> <i>The next relaxed body posture is called <u>Head</u>. Move your head from side to side. Your head is relaxed when it is in alignment and facing straight ahead (demonstrate). If you have a chair with a high back, your head can rest on the cushioned back of the chair. Your head is not relaxed if it is crooked. (Make sure that the survivor has his/her head in the correct position). Now take a few moments to notice the sensations as you relax your head.</i></p> <p><b>MOUTH:</b> <i>The next relaxed posture is called <u>Mouth</u>. Move your mouth. Your mouth is relaxed when your teeth are parted and your lips are open in the center (demonstrate). Your mouth is not relaxed if your lips are closed, if you smile, or lick your lips. Please show me a relaxed mouth. Now take a few moments to notice the sensations as you relax your mouth.</i></p> <p><b>THROAT:</b> <i>The next relaxed posture is called <u>Throat</u>. Feel yourself swallow. Your throat is relaxed when it is smooth and quiet (demonstrate). Your throat is not relaxed if there is a lot of swallowing or muscle twitching. Please show me a relaxed throat. (Make sure that the survivor has his/her mouth in the correct position). Now take a few moments to notice the sensations as you relax your throat.</i></p> <p><b>BREATHING:</b> <i>The next relaxed activity is called <u>Breathing</u>. Take a deep breath and let it out slowly. Your breathing is relaxed when it is slow and regular (demonstrate). Breathe from your diaphragm, feeling your stomach expanding with each breath. Remember to breathe out slowly.</i></p> <p><b>QUIET:</b> <i>The next relaxed activity is called <u>Quiet</u>. Take a moment and listen. You are quiet when you are not making any noise, such as talking, loud sighs or snores and when you are focused on your own internal sensations. Alright, lets focus on quiet for the next few moments. Let any distracting noises fade into the background as you focus on your breathing.</i></p> <p><b>EYES:</b> <i>The final relaxed area is called <u>Eyes</u>. Notice your eyes. Your eyes are relaxed when the lids are closed and smooth (demonstrate). Your eyes are not relaxed when they are tightly shut, or if there is eye movement beneath the lids. Please relax your eyes. (Make sure that the survivor has his/her eyes in the correct position). Feel the sensations as you allow your eyes to relax. Very good now open your eyes."</i></p>
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## ***Recommend Daily Practice.***

Reiterate that acquiring these anxiety management skills is like learning anything new: they will get better with practice. The survivor should be encouraged to practice at least one of his/her relaxation skills on a daily basis. In addition, encourage the survivor to keep his/her handouts for future reference and practice.

# Arousal Reduction

## Arousal Reduction: CHILD AND ADOLESCENT VERSION

Similar to positive activities scheduling, arousal reduction represents a basic set of skills that promotes recovery from disaster among children and adolescents. However, the provider must use his/her judgment about the presentation of this skill. High arousal may not be identified as an important concern, although it may be difficult for children, adolescents, or caregivers to recognize or report overarousal when more overtly troubling issues such as disruptive or reckless behavior are present. Overarousal, or difficulties with controlling emotions, often contribute to behavior problems, so it is important to provide this skill set in most instances unless there is a clear reason not to.

Two relaxation techniques are described below: controlled, relaxing breathing and progressive muscle relaxation. Both techniques can be helpful. We recommend beginning with controlled relaxed breathing first because this is a less complicated skill set. **Note that the term “deep breathing” is not used here because this term sometimes is interpreted to mean that the goal is to take very deep inhale breaths. This can contribute to hyperventilation and also makes it difficult for the child or adolescent to focus on a slow, controlled exhale breath.**

When teaching children how to do relaxation techniques, it is often useful to do it as an entire family or as sibling groups. Not only do the adults frequently have the same issues of arousal and stress, but by doing it together they can support the practicing after the session.

It is especially helpful to have parents and young children doing it together. Also, some teenagers may be too self-conscious to do it with their family. You should give them the choice to do it alone or with the family. If the child does it without the parents, you should try to take a few minutes to have the child teach caregivers the techniques. This makes them feel like experts and engages the parents in the activity.

### *Explain Rationale for Arousal Reduction*

<b>Child</b>	<p>“Sometimes people get all kinds of uneasy feelings in their minds and in their bodies when bad things happen like (use relevant event, e.g. <i>hurricane, floods, tornado, shoot etc</i>). They may feel nervous or just feel kind of mad and snappy. Sometimes thoughts about some of the bad things that happen pop into your head and make you feel panicky or upset.”</p> <p>“Sometimes people just talk about not feeling right or feeling different than they did before and they just can’t pinpoint it. They may have a harder time falling asleep or not feel like eating or feel like eating all the time. Some people get lots of headaches or stomach aches that the doctors and nurses can’t explain.”</p> <p>“All of the feelings in both your mind and your body are letting you know that you’re feeling stressed out. Funny thing is, the reason why doesn’t necessarily matter. Sometimes, it only takes a small thing to make somebody feel upset especially when they’ve gone through so many hard things.”</p>
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# Arousal Reduction

## *Explain Skill of Controlled, Relaxed Breathing.*

<b>Child</b>	<p>“The good news is that there are things that you can do:</p> <p>“A pretty easy thing to do when you’re feeling stressed, overwhelmed, or nervous is called controlled, relaxed breathing. It works by making the body slow down by resetting it to your breathing. When you get good at it you won’t have to do all the things we’re doing now, but these steps will make it easier to learn. This kind of breathing is a little different because you breathe out more slowly than you breathe in.</p>
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## *Model, then Coach, Inhalation and Exhalation.*

<b>Child</b>	<p>“Let me show you how it’s done. (Demonstrate here). See I breathe through my nose and breathe out more slowly than I breathe in. It’s important to do this either sitting up straight or lying on your back. One way to keep your breathing timed right. Is to count...breathe in 1 count, 2 count; breathe out 1count, 2 count, 3 count.”</p> <p>“It’s also good to think of a word that makes you feel relaxed when you’re doing the breathing. Some kids use words like calm or relax. I’ve had some kids use a word that reminds them of a place or activity they especially enjoy like beach, park or fishing and baseball. You can choose any word you want that you find relaxing.” (Make sure the word they choose is one that doesn’t cause excitement or arousal. For younger, children have them pick their favorite color for breathing in and use the color gray for breathing out.)</p> <p>“O.K. lets, practice now. Think of that relaxing word; breathe through your nose: Breathe in 1 and 2, out 1 and 2 and 3. Good.”</p> <p>“How does it feel?”</p> <p>*If he/she say that it is helpful and relaxing, support the response.</p> <p>*If he/she deny its helpfulness, then you can tell the child that it will help when he/she practices more.</p> <p>“Controlled, relaxed breathing helps us tell our bodies that we are safe and we can relax. We are going to practice taking nice, slow breaths in and breathing out very slowly. This type of breathing takes practice. It’s kind of like learning to ride a bike. You have to practice a lot so you can ride. You can’t just hop on a bike all of a sudden and expect to ride perfectly.”</p>
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Often when working with young children, it helps to make a game of the controlled, relaxing breathing exercise. Some ideas include:

- Blow bubbles with a bubble wand and dish soap
- Blow bubbles with chewing gum
- Blow paper wads or cotton balls across the table
- Tell a story where the child helps you imitate a character who is taking deep breaths
- Let the child be the expert and teach his/her caregiver or sibling how to do it

## *Recommend Daily Practice.*

Make sure that the family knows to practice everyday. Review things that typically come up for them during the day when controlled, relaxing breathing would be useful. At least, they should practice before going to sleep. Explain that by doing deep relaxed breathing before bed, it may help them sleep. If children practice this skill, they will be better able to use it in times when it is really needed. Encourage the caregiver to practice this skill with the child. Remind them that deep breathing is beneficial to adults as well. Have them select a time and place where they can begin to practice deep breathing regularly.

## *Explain Skill of Muscle Relaxation*

<b>Child</b>	<p>“Another really helpful thing to do when feeling stressed is call Progressive Muscle Relaxation. It’s a little harder to do, but works really well. Some people find it really good when it’s hard to sleep. It works by tensing and relaxing different muscles in the body, which makes people, feel very relaxed. (Demonstrate with hands)”</p> <p>“I want you to pretend that you are on the starting line of a big race. You want to run very fast and win. How does your body look on the starting line? How do your arms feel? Your legs? Your stomach?” [Comment on the child’s description on his/her muscle tension and give the child feedback as well: “Look, those leg muscles look very tense. You do look ready to run!”]</p> <p>“When we are not in danger or need to run, sometimes our muscles stay tense. This can make us feel bad like having stomachaches, headaches, or make our bodies hurt in other ways.” [Discuss any similar physical descriptions that the child or caregiver may provide.]</p> <p>“We are going to practice an exercise called muscle relaxation. This is going to help you notice what calm muscles feel like and learn how to make your muscles relax. Parent/caregiver, I’m going to ask you to join in. You can help Billy practice and these exercises are perfect for adults, too.”</p>
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## *Conduct Muscle Relaxation Exercise*

Repeat each procedure at least once, tensing each muscle group five to seven seconds and then relaxing them for twenty to thirty seconds. Remember to observe the difference between the sensations of tension and relaxation.

<b>Child</b>	<p><b>“Step 1:</b> Fold both your hands into tight fists. Tighten the biceps and forearms. Hold on for a few seconds. Relax.”</p> <p><b>“Step 2:</b> Wrinkle your forehead. At the same time, push your head as far back as possible. Roll it towards the right and then towards the left, then bring it back. Now tense up all your facial muscles - press your eyes hard, wrinkle your forehead, tighten your jaws, tongue pressing the roof of the mouth. Stay in this position for a few seconds, and then relax.”</p> <p><b>“Step 3:</b> Arch your back as you take a deep breath. Hold. Relax. Take a deep breath, pressing out stomach. Hold. Relax.”</p> <p><b>“Step 4:</b> Pull your feet and toes up towards the face. Hold. Relax. Now push your feet and toes down, tightening the calves, thighs and buttocks. Hold for a few seconds, then relax.”</p>
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Children and adolescents can teach their parents or siblings how to do it or the entire process can be done in a family meeting.

Make sure that the child or family knows to practice everyday. Review things that typically come up for them during the day when the skill would be useful. At least, they should practice before going to sleep.

Some children have difficulty paying attention long enough to get through the entire muscle relaxation script. In these cases, you and the child can decide on two or three exercises of focus. You can also introduce the following quick, whole-body relaxation technique.

“First let’s begin by pretending you’re a robot. How do robots stand? Right, they are very stiff and straight. Hold your whole body stiff like a robot. Notice how tense your muscles feel. It doesn’t feel very relaxing does it? Great. Now I want you to pretend your body is a piece of cooked spaghetti. How does spaghetti look? It’s all loose and floppy, right? Yes, just like that! Ok, now I’m going to call out, “robot!” then “cooked spaghetti.” When I call out each of those, I want you to hold your body in that position until I tell you to switch.”

“Robot!”

“Cooked spaghetti!” [Wait approximately 5-10 seconds, then repeat cycle.]

# Arousal Reduction

## *Recommend Daily Practice.*

Emphasize that it is helpful to practice either deep breathing or muscle relaxation every day. If the child practices these skills, he/she will be better able to use it in times when it is really needed. Encourage the caregiver to practice this skill with the child. Remind he/she that these exercised are beneficial to adults as well. Have them select a time and place where they can practice together.