

The 'RE-LAX' technique and its application to the fields of coaching, counselling and stress management

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Abstract

This article briefly describes the RE-LAX relaxation technique which can be used in a range of coaching domains including business, executive, health, life, performance, personal, sport and wellbeing. Within sport and health coaching it can be used to reduce physical tension and enhance physiological control including the lowering of blood pressure and heart rate.

Key terms: RE-LAX technique, relaxation, stress management, physiological arousal, wellbeing coaching, coaching psychology

Introduction

Relaxation and mindfulness based techniques have become standard methods to manage anxiety often within training and therapeutic settings.

Relaxation techniques to reduce stress, decrease physiological arousal and enhance performance have also been used within a range of coaching and coaching psychology domains including business, executive, health, life, performance, personal and sport (Anshel, 1991; McMorris & Hale, 2006; Palmer, 2008a,b; Palmer, 2017; Palmer & Szymanska, 2019; Palmer, Cooper, & Thomas, 2003; Williams & Thomas, 2005). Mindfulness based techniques have also been used within coaching (Irons, Palmer & Hall, 2019; Passmore & Marianetti, 2007;

Spence, 2019). Relaxation and mindfulness techniques can assist clients encountering sleeping difficulties and insomnia (eg Black et al., 2015).

The RE-LAX Technique

With the increased levels of stress and anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was noticeable that some coachees and clients had raised levels of stress and anxiety and were having more difficulties sleeping. The RE-LAX technique was developed as a simple and quick method for coachees, therapeutic clients and stress management trainees to manage stress, improve sleeping, enhance performance and wellbeing.

Using the RE-LAX Relaxation Technique

Opposite is the RE-LAX script (page 33). The practitioner reads it aloud in a relaxed style and steady intonation. The instructions to '*pause*' are instructions to the practitioner and are not read out aloud. A '*pause*' is approximately between two to four seconds depending upon the time available and also if a tense coachee requires more time to relax. The '*extended pause*' relates to the length of time that the coach has previously agreed with the coachee for the exercise to last. For the first session, it is recommended that the exercise lasts no more than 3 to 5 minutes so that the coachee can provide feedback on the exercise. Subsequent sessions can last longer.

Discussion

One of the problems with anxiety and stress is that people are likely to ruminate and worry about their situation. Their negative thinking maintains their levels of

anxiety. The RE-LAX technique targets both the raised physiological arousal that occurs with anxiety and the psychological component (ie the negative cognitions) by encouraging the coachee to focus on their breathing and using the word 'Re-Lax' to attenuate any ruminations.

Understandably, coachees, therapeutic clients and stress management trainees can be sceptical about the effectiveness of what may be perceived as a simple technique. However, many people now have clip-on oximeters and other devices to measure their heartrate and blood pressure. Taking a note of their heartrate and blood pressure immediately before and after using the RE-LAX technique can be a useful physiological measure of its effectiveness. With regular practice, the technique can be applied rapidly in many situations or prior to an event that triggers performance anxiety.

A small minority of people can find that relaxation and mindfulness exercises can trigger pre-existing conditions such as panic attacks (Palmer, 1993; Palmer & Dryden, 1995). Even though this is unlikely to happen, as with any intervention, it is advisable to ask coachees or clients if they have ever experienced any problems using relaxation, mindfulness or mediation techniques. If they have then the practitioner may decide not to use the RE-LAX technique.

It is recommended that practitioners should practise using the RE-LAX technique on themselves prior to using within their practice. The application of relaxation techniques can be discussed during supervision and relevant Continuing Professional Development may be necessary.

The 'RE-LAX' Technique Script

Preparation: Prepare coachee or client for the exercise. Explain the simple technique. Then agree how long the exercise will last for.

Can you make yourself as comfortable as possible in your chair.

Pause

If you find closing your eyes aids relaxation, then you may wish to close your eyes for this exercise.

Pause

If you would like to listen to the noises outside the room.

(NB If using a virtual platform and coachee is using headphones, then this sentence and the following three can be left out)

Pause

And now listen to the noises inside the room.

Pause

These noises will come and go throughout this session and you can choose to let them just drift over your mind or ignore them if you wish.

Pause

Notice as you breathe.

Pause

On each out-breath you feel more and more relaxed. This is quite normal.

Pause

I would like you in your mind to say 'Re' as you breathe in and 'Lax' as you breathe out.

(NB The practitioner can initially observe the coachee's breathing and say aloud 'Re-Lax' in rhythm to the coachee breathing.)

Pause

For the next 'X' minutes repeat this 'Re-Lax' exercise every time you breathe in and out.

(NB Insert at 'X' the number of minutes that was agreed at the start of the session.)

Extended Pause

With regular practise, using this technique will enable you to relax more quickly.

Pause

In your own time, open your eyes.

Pause

Debrief: Practitioner can then ask for feedback about the exercise. Were any difficulties encountered? Did the coachee feel more relaxed? Remind the coachee that regular practice is necessary in order to be able to rapidly apply the technique in stressful situations or when encountering sleeping problems due to negative ruminations.

The 'RE-LAX' Technique Script: © 2021, Stephen Palmer

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Biography

Prof Stephen Palmer PhD is Co-ordinating Director, ISCP International Centre for Coaching Psychology Research, Professor of Practice at the Wales Academy for Professional Practice and Applied Research, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, and Adjunct Professor of Coaching Psychology, Aalborg University, Denmark. He is also Honorary President of the International

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