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| **Relaxation Strategies for a More Happy, Calm Life** |
| At Quest Camp, we teach all of our campers several strategies to help them calm down when they are sad, mad, or worried. Our campers are taught how to take deep breaths, use progressive relaxation, and engage in imagery among various other relaxation and coping strategies. We have our campers practice these three strategies every single week of camp since these three techniques are well known, common strategies that have been found to significantly help people to calm down and feel better in times of stress. I believe that these three strategies are so helpful to both children and adults that it is rare for me not to discuss these same tools for relaxation with almost every client that comes into my private practice office. Building relaxation into the lives of all people is crucial since research shows that people who generally devote 20 minutes per day towards relaxation are found to have less anxiety and depression than others. Some people tell me that they don't have the time to engage in relaxation. I typically respond to this sentiment that the benefits are so high for relaxation that I don't think people can afford not to make the time since this kind of self care decreases difficulties and improves things like productivity. I view these tools for relaxation as primary for all people and believe that this type of skill building should occur for all children from an early age. Just as children are taught to read and write, they should be taught how to label their feelings and use coping skills.    A brief description of deep breathing, progressive relaxation, and imagery is provided below. These strategies are great when used in times of calm, but are also to be utilized in times of stress such as when feeling anxious, depressed, or angry. I often have people combine these together as well since that can add to feeling more relaxed. For example: a person might continue to focus on taking nice slow deep breaths while engaging in progressive relaxation or imagery. I often recommend that people take deep breaths, use progressive relaxation, and imagery first thing in the morning, while getting into bed for the night, and throughout the day when they are feeling stressed. Imagery can be particularly helpful at night since some of the same brain waves associated with daydreaming are the same brain waves that are found to be the precursors to sleep.    Deep Breaths:  Deep breaths are good for children and adults since these breaths reset our system since when we are upset or stressed we naturally don't breathe as deeply as we do normally when not under stress. By taking breaths that are much deeper than normal we can send messages to our body to calm down and restabilize.     1. Breathe air in through the nose and into the diaphragm, with air exiting through the mouth. If done correctly the stomach should rise for each breath (instead of the chest). I actually have children put their hands on their stomachs while they are learning to take deep breaths since their hand should rise if they are taking deep breaths correctly. 2. Each breath takes about 10 seconds. Breathing in for a slow 4 count (1, 1000, 2, 1000, 3, 1000, 4), holding for 1 second then out for a slow 5 count.   Progressive Relaxation:  Progressive Relaxation is a systematic process with the body that involves tightening various muscle groups one at a time and focusing on releasing the tension in that part of the body.   1. Tighten a muscle for 3 seconds, and then say, "relax," focusing all thoughts on having the tension leave that part of the body. 2. First tighten fists for this 3-second process listed in step 1, then forearms, then biceps. It is then helpful to focus all thoughts on tension draining out from this whole section of the body. 3. This process is then repeated for different sections of the body.   -First bringing shoulders up toward ears, then tightening muscles in the forehead, then squeezing the eyes together, clenching teeth, tightening chest muscles, then abdominal muscles. Next, focus all thoughts on tension draining out from this section of the body.  -Proceed to tightening quadriceps, then calves, arches, down to the toes. Again, mentally focusing on all the tension draining out through the whole body.    Imagery:  Imagery is basically engaging in a thought process to think about your "happy place." I sometimes think of this as a 2-minute vacation, where someone can transport himself or herself anyplace. Often people pick things like a beautiful place to visit such as the beach, mountains, vacation spot, or in an old memory. Children will also often pick made up places in their imagination or places in videogames. The key is to pick someplace that is a happy place where it is impossible to think of this place without feeling happy or smiling. The imagery exercise below also focuses on engaging your senses since this can make the image more real and a more powerful tool for relaxation.   1. Imagine that you are in a place that makes you feel happy, safe, and/or relaxed. 2. Take in all that you can see as you enjoy being in your favorite place. 3. Take in all that you can hear as you enjoy being in your favorite place. 4. Take in all that you can taste as you enjoy being in your favorite place. 5. Take in all that you can smell as you enjoy being in your favorite place. 6. Take in all that you can touch as you enjoy being in your favorite place. 7. Take in all that you can feel as you enjoy being in your favorite place. 8. Feel at peace knowing that you can always return to your favorite place when you need to.     Imagery can also be a powerful tool for building self-confidence. I will often use imagery with children and adults who are struggling with things like test anxiety. In this case instead of thinking of a relaxing memory, we will work to find a moment of success where the person felt like they could accomplish anything such as success in a sporting event, getting an "A" on a test, etc. The person will then take a few deep breaths and call up this image for a short time period when it is time to start the test that they are anxious about.    My hope is that you and your children will find these strategies helpful. The exciting thing to me is that I typically find that these techniques often work better for people the more often they practice them and that the these techniques should continue to work for children as they grow to be adults. In addition, children and adults are often able to find which of these tools work better in different types of stressful situations. The analogy I often give is of how in a toolbox both a hammer and a screwdriver are incredibly helpful, but they both have different uses and benefits. Relaxation is viewed as so important that there are many great resources for people interested in learning more. Two of my favorite books with information regarding relaxation and stress management are the Anxiety and Phobia Workbook and the Mind over Mood Workbook. There are also good relaxation CDs available that guide people through progressive relaxation and imagery. I hope that as you and your family try out these strategies you will see their usefulness. |