

TIPP Skills

Staples Psychology

Cognitive techniques are fantastic for adapting the way we think to fit a distressing scenario, or for making our thinking a bit more rational or realistic. In the end, it can save us a lot of emotional discomfort.

But cognitive skills are not always possible. For example, imagine you are in a particularly distressing situation that raises your anxiety (for me, I immediately think of being on an airplane). If we are in that actual situation, at the height of our anxiety, applying cognitive skills either won't do us much good because we're freaking out too much, or we wouldn't even be able to apply them to begin with (again, because we're freaking out too much!).

This is where TIPP skills come in. When we've passed that "emotional threshold," our body takes over, and thinking straight becomes impossible. Our technique needs to change with it; we need to "fight fire with fire" and use techniques focused on our body instead. "TIPP" is an acronym for skills we can use that are body-focused:

Temperature. *We have an interesting reflex programmed into our central nervous systems called the "diver's reflex." You may have experienced this if you've ever jumped into a pool and it was colder than you expected -- you get that sudden "gasp" of air and tensing of the body related to the shock of the cold. That is the diver's reflex, and it primarily happens when water hits our face. What's actually happening is our vagus nerve is being "cleared" of all signals to focus on the cold water. Included with these signals are all those that are happening when our body is in "freak-out mode."*

To take advantage of this: Keep ice packs in your freezer. Or keep a bottle of cold ice water with you if you're out of the home in a potentially distressing scenario. Then press the cold compress against the side of your face, your wrists, and/or the side of your neck. This will immediately bring down your heart rate and blood pressure. In the winter, stepping out into the cold for a moment can also promote the same reaction.

Intense Exercise. *When we exercise, we stress out our bodies. Even chemically, cortisol (the "stress hormone" begins rushing through our veins, affecting every organ. However, our bodies also have the means to "offset" this stress, namely with dopamine and endorphins. Leveraging this reaction can help bring us out of crisis in much the same way: We already have the cortisol running through our veins because of the stress anyway, so let's introduce a little dopamine and endorphins, shall we?*

To take advantage of this: This works best when the exercise is short-burst and high-intensity. I'm not saying you have to find a track and do win-sprints (although you can) -- even calisthenics can work. Find a place where you can knock out a few push-ups, or do some sit-ups, or some jumping jacks. Get that heart rate up, and the endorphins will follow.

-next-

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Progressive Muscle Relaxation. *You may be familiar with this one. Progressive muscle relaxation (or “PMR”) is different than just straight muscle relaxation (where you’re just focused on relaxing the muscles and nothing else). With PMR, we also focus on TENSING our muscles. It seems counter-intuitive, but it makes sense if you think about it: Our muscles are already tense with the stress that we’re currently under. With PMR, we are matching that tension, but then following it up with relaxation. Similar to the intense exercise, we’re meeting our body where it is in the moment, and then introducing soothing sensations.*

To take advantage of this: There are a lot of PRM techniques out there (do a google search or YouTube search to find a few that work best for you), but the most simple method of PMR is first picking a muscle group (preferably one that tenses up when you get stressed -- for me that’s my fists). Check in with that muscle group and notice how tense it is. Then slowly *tense up the muscle group even more* for a few seconds, hold it, then follow with a quick “release” of the group. Tense, hold, and release. Do this several times. With each repetition you will notice that with each *release* your muscles become progressively relaxed (hence the name, *progressive* relaxation).

Paired Breathing. *There are other resources out there that discuss TIPP skills (see footer for one such resource). In nearly every one of these, they call this “paced breathing.” But I’m not a fan of this, and I’ll tell you why: So far we’ve been focused on meeting our body where it already is in its distress. I feel like paced breathing is breaking with that theme. Imagine being in a panic scenario and trying to pace your breathing! Doesn’t work, does it? Instead, I like “paired breathing,” with the “paired” referring to “pairing” the breathing to match the progressive muscle relaxation (tense-and-release) pattern. In fact, these two “P’s” work fine on their own, but work best when they are paired together, practiced at the same time.*

To take advantage of this: With our PMR technique, we tensed our muscles before we relaxed them. We met our body where it was. We want to do that here, too. Breathing is erratic and sharp when we’re stressed. So to match this, instead of breathing in slowly (like “paced” breathing calls for), we’re going to breathe REALLY sharp and deep. Then, similar to our PMR “tensing,” we’re going to hold it for a couple of seconds, and then release by exhaling slowly. Again, this works best by “pairing” it with PMR, so try it with the PMR technique by breathing in quickly and deeply as you tense a muscle group, then hold both, and then release both at the same time. Rinse and repeat, and you’ll find with each successive release, relaxation becomes deeper (you may even feel a nice tingling sensation).

This techniques don’t really introduce anything dramatically different to our body -- the reason they work is because we are taking advantage of adaptive reflexes that our body already has programmed. This is why they work so well - we don’t have to “train” our body to respond to these techniques. Just keep in mind that it’s still useful to practice this. And also, keep in mind that this will not “erase” your stress or anxiety, but it will hopefully bring it down to a manageable enough level, under our “emotional thresholds,” to where those fantastic cognitive techniques will finally work.