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Goodbye Anxiety

**Turning Anxiety into Positive
Energy:**

The Relaxation Reflex



Dr. Stephen Price
Michelle Price
CLOVIS HILLS COMMUNITY CHURCH

Turning Anxiety into Positive Energy

“God designed the hormonal emergency alarm system to save our lives. But what happens when a person activates this system too many times for too many reasons? The alarm system is turned upside down into something that destroys life.” – Don Colbert, MD, from Stress Less

1. The “Fight-Or-Flight” Response

The “fight-or-flight” response is caused by a burst of **adrenalin** in response to a sudden threat. This human anxiety or stress response was originally a mechanism for survival. We, as humans, are wired with a “fight or flight” response, or strong urge to fight or run, that is triggered when we are threatened or feel afraid. This response was originally designed to save our lives in primitive times.

Before we locked up the animals in zoos and started shopping for our food at supermarkets, our prehistoric ancestors lived a little closer to wild beasts and hunted for their meat. When attacked by beasts they couldn’t easily kill, our ancestors needed either extra strength to defend themselves or extra energy for running away.

When our “fight or flight” response is triggered by something that threatens or scares us, adrenaline rushes into the bloodstream to give us added strength to either fight off the threat or run from it. At the same time, the body shuts down non-essential activity to conserve energy to deal with the immediate threat at hand. In other words, our body has a rush of extra energy because it is saving energy by not doing things it doesn’t absolutely need to do to sustain life.

During the “fight or flight” response, your body makes the following adjustments:

- Your heart beats faster to pump more blood into your muscles for extra strength while fighting.
- Your breathing gets faster and deeper to increase the supply of oxygen.
- Your muscles get tight to prepare for action.
- You experience a cold sweat to prepare for the warmer sweat that will come with activity.
- Blood vessels near the surface of the body constrict to reduce blood loss if you are wounded.
- You shiver and your hairs stand up to conserve heat and to keep the body from getting too cold when the peripheral blood vessels constrict.
- Your pupils dilate so you can see the danger more clearly.
- Your digestive system shuts down and the extra blood goes to the voluntary muscles.
- Your mouth gets dry because your saliva flow decreases when the digestive system shuts down.
- You may feel the need to empty your bladder and bowels to be freer for physical activity.

All of these bodily changes helped our ancestors do things like club a bear for food or run from a tiger to save their life.

In today's more civilized society, most threats we face are psychological, not physical. In the case of stress and anxiety, our own thoughts can scare us. The problem is that a psychological threat can trigger the same "fight or flight" response as a physical threat, but the bodily changes aren't needed to save your life.

In modern times we have pretty much renamed the "fight or flight" response. We call it a panic attack. Some of us who suffer from anxiety and stress have developed an over-reactive "fight or flight" response, we have lots of panic attacks. A panic attack is a lot less exciting and a far less glorious picture than fighting or fleeing from a wild animal.

This mechanism of the nervous system, designed to save our lives in cave-dwelling times, can be a nuisance to us in the modern world. Unless you really need to run from a wild animal or vicious attacker, the adrenalin can be overwhelming. In extreme cases, the added adrenalin can make you feel like you are going to have a heart attack or lose your mind. It can make you feel like your body is going to jump out of control. The rapid breathing associated with the "fight-or-flight" response serves no purpose if you are not running from anything and is just needless "hyperventilating."

Understanding God's purpose for this response and how to counter it with relaxation exercises is a key to turning anxiety into positive energy.

2. The Coping Response

The coping response is the body's way of seeking to adapt to an ongoing negative situation. In this stage, the body no longer reacts with the "fight-or-flight" response. Instead, the body produces a large amount of stress hormones, especially **cortisol**.

Cortisol is a steroid hormone that stimulates the release of fats, glucose, and amino acids for energy. Cortisol is very important in helping to control excessive inflammation, maintain blood pressure, and maintain connective tissue. It also helps improve a person's sense of well-being. God has a purpose for cortisol when it is regulated in the body.

Under normal conditions, cortisol is secreted according to a 24-hour cycle with highs and lows. When the body is under prolonged stress, cortisol levels are elevated all of the time. When cortisol levels remain elevated over time, it can cause:

- Insomnia and other sleep disturbances
- Weight gain (due to stimulation of the appetite, lowered insulin levels)
- Diabetes (due to decreased transportation of glucose at the cellular level).
- Sex hormone difficulties (menstrual problems, estrogen imbalance).
- Memory loss (shrinking of the hippocampus in the brain).
- Depression (due to an imbalance of serotonin and dopamine in the brain).
- Osteoporosis
- Decreased immunity
- Hypertension
- Weakness and fatigue
- Excessive body hair in women

3. Exhaustion

When a person stays under constant stress with high cortisol levels for a long period of time, **adrenal fatigue** sets in. This is when the body begins to break down and the risk of chronic disease increases dramatically. Adrenal fatigue leads to being burned out mentally, physically, and emotionally. Adrenal fatigue may affect any of the body's organs.

People in this stage are prone to developing autoimmune disorders like thyroiditis, lupus, rheumatoid arthritis, psoriasis, or multiple sclerosis. They may also experience:

- Muscle loss and fat gain
- Heartburn, bloating and gas
- Chronic fatigue
- Fibromyalgia
- Irregular menstrual periods
- Hormonal imbalance
- Severe PMS
- Loss of sex drive
- Irritable bowel syndrome
- Psychiatric disorders
- Cancer
- Alzheimer's Disease

4. Anxiety as a Form of Energy

"Nerves provide me with energy. They work for me. It's when I don't have them, when I feel at ease, that I get worried." – Mike Nichols

As dreadful as panic attacks and the physical symptoms of stress and anxiety are, the energy behind them can be used to your advantage. If you have panic attacks, you are uniquely able to experience the same increase in adrenalin that provides top athletes and performers with the energy they need to be at their best when it really counts.

5. Peak Performance vs. Weak Performance

Peak Performance

Every athlete or performer has experienced the amazing state of peak performance at least once. Totally lost in the moment and focused on the task at hand, the past and future do not exist. Every move you make is perfect. Your mind and body work in perfect harmony, your behavior is instinctual, and your motions are mindless. It's as if the whole world has vanished, nothing exists but the task at hand, and everything just naturally goes your way.

Athletes describe this state of peak performance as being "in the zone," "on a roll," "in the groove," or "in a state of flow."

The state of peak performance is produced by nervous arousal and adrenalin rushing into the bloodstream, which is why most athletes and performers experience it when under competitive pressure.

If your body is capable of panic attacks, you are better wired than most people to achieve peak performance when under pressure. Here's why: Your nervous system is hypersensitive to adrenalin and quickly aroused. You become stronger, faster, and more focused when faced with a threat or challenge. Believe it or not, people with panic disorders, including agoraphobia, are known for helping others in the midst of a sudden crisis.

Weak Performance

When the nervous arousal and adrenalin rush needed for peak performance flares up when you don't need it, you are thrust into a state of "weak performance," confusion and disorientation – or a panic attack.

Whether in peak performance mode or outright panic, your body's nervous system goes into overdrive and adrenalin is released into your bloodstream. Your heart rate and oxygen intake increases, and your conscious thoughts shut down. Decisions and actions become instinctual.

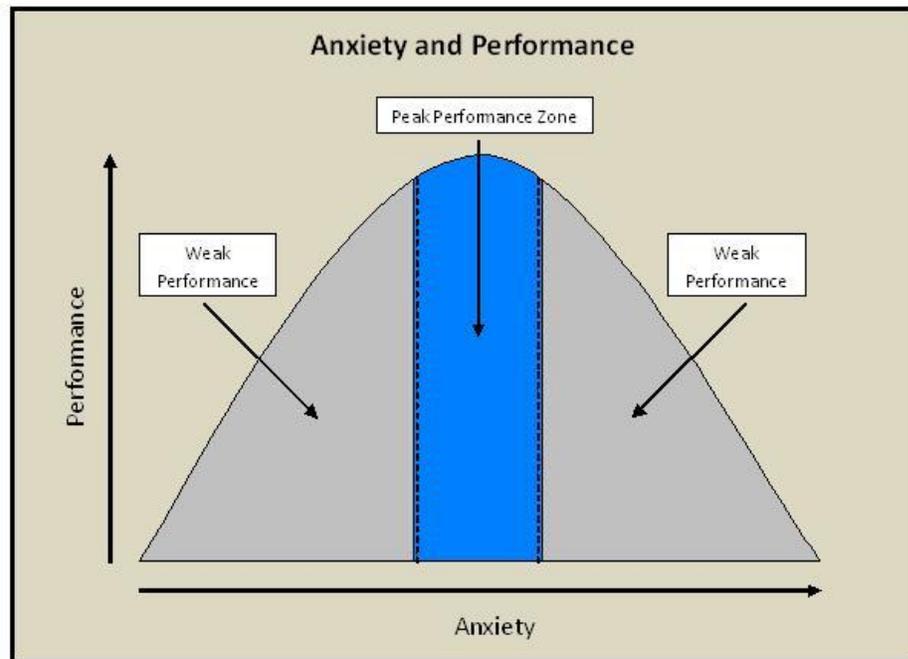
One question can make the difference in how you experience the physical changes. When something triggers your body's "fight or flight" response, the critical question is: Do you need a boost in nervous energy, oxygen, and blood flow to respond to the challenge?

If the answer is "yes," you will experience the state of peak performance. If the answer is "no," you will suffer anxiety symptoms or a panic attack.

6. The Relationship Between Anxiety and Performance

Anxiety, in the right amount, provides a great source of energy and motivation. Most actors give their best performances in front of live audiences – Olympic records are never set during practice sessions in an empty stadium. This is because some level of nervous arousal, or anxiety, is required to perform at your best. The challenge is in finding balance.

The relationship between nervous arousal and performance looks like an inverted "U" with the optimal amount of arousal for peak performance at the very top.



If your level of arousal falls short of the optimal range, you are likely to feel bored, unchallenged, and unmotivated. On the other hand, if your level of arousal falls above the optimal range, you'll probably feel overwhelmed and panicky. Your thoughts will race, and you'll find it difficult to concentrate, particularly if the task requires much thought. The state of "fight or flight" impairs your ability to think or process information.

7. How to Turn Anxiety into Positive Energy – The Relaxation Reflex

If you suffer from too much adrenalin or panic attacks, it is more helpful to learn how to maintain the optimal level of anxiety for peak performance.

With time and effort, you can gain complete control over the “fight or flight” response and use your anxiety as a powerful source of motivation and energy. You can learn to turn on the adrenalin when you need it, and turn it off when you don’t.

To exert control over the “fight or flight” response, which is triggered automatically before you have time to think, you need to develop a counter response – a conditioned relaxation reflex that you call upon to immediately stop the panic.

There are four steps to creating a relaxation reflex:

- 1) Deep Breathing: Learning to breathe deeply and slowly, in a way that refreshes and enlivens your body.
- 2) Muscle Relaxation: Learning reduce tension in your muscles, using progressive muscle relaxation techniques.
- 3) Visualization: Learning to create peaceful, relaxing pictures in your mind.
- 4) Relaxation Cue: Creating a relaxation cue (word or phrase) that you learn to associate with a deep state of relaxation.

To many people, learning to relax, or regulate their anxiety level, on cue sounds too simple to be possible. However, this technique is based upon a well-known phenomenon called “classical conditioning.” In everyday language, classical conditioning is just programming yourself to respond to a cue in a certain way. This is done by pairing that cue with something that causes the response you want.

Classical conditioning emerged from an experiment done by Russian Psychologist, Ivan Pavlov, in the 1890s. Pavlov trained a dog to salivate at the sound of a bell. He did this by ringing a bell right before the dog received food. After doing this enough times, the dog started salivating at the sound of the bell because it associated the bell with food. Current research tells us that it takes between 12-16 weeks of daily practice to create a conditioned response.

In the same way, you can teach yourself to relax when you say a cue word, provided you learn to associate that word with a state of deep relaxation through repeated practice.

Cue-controlled relaxation can be used to regulate anxiety because it teaches your body a “relaxation response” to replace the “fight or flight” response to an anxiety-producing situation or stress.

8. Script for Creating a Relaxation Reflex

To download a copy of this script being read to soft, relaxing music, visit:

www.goodbeyanxiety.com

Remember, going through this script only a few times will not be enough to give you control over your anxiety level. It will take 12-16 weeks of practicing this script before you will experience the ability to regulate your anxiety.

Introduction

“You are feeling calm, relaxed, and at peace. Soon you will be going to a retreat in your mind. This is a safe, tranquil resting place where you will reach a deep state of inner quiet. But first, you will be guided through some steps to slow down your breathing and loosen any tension in your muscles.

Take a moment to sit or lie down in a comfortable position and loosen any tight clothing. Take off your shoes and remove your belt to help yourself relax. You may close your eyes or leave them open if you wish.”

Deep Breathing

“Now, gently place one hand on your stomach near your belly button and your other hand on the center of your chest. Keeping your hands in place, breathe in slowly through your nose and out through your mouth. As you breathe, take note of the movement of your hands. Allow the hand on your stomach to slowly rise with each breath. As you breathe out, allow it to lower very gently. If you can, breathe so the hand on your chest moves only slightly as you breathe in and out. Focus on the rising and falling of your stomach while keeping your chest still. When you are breathing this way, you are breathing deeply and from the bottom of your lungs, causing your body to enter a deeper state of relaxation than before.

Now you will breathe in quietly through your nose, slowly filling your lungs for a count of four, hold it for a count of four, and breathe out for a count of four. When you breathe out you will completely empty the contents of your lungs and let your stomach flatten. Every time you breathe out, imagine that you are breathing out all of the tensions and the worries of the day.

Breathe in; two, three, four. Hold it; two, three, four. Breathe out; two, three, four. (Repeat four times)

Now relax and continue to breathe quietly and naturally. Notice the feeling of calm that spreads over your body as you breathe deeply and from the bottom of your lungs. Stop to let yourself enjoy this feeling for a moment.”

(Pause for a few seconds)

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

“Now you will begin relaxing the muscle groups in your body. You will tighten each muscle group as hard as you can, squeezing it for a count of eight, and then release it for a count of eight.

Each time you tighten a group of muscles, really squeeze them as hard as you can. It is okay if the muscles start to shake or if you feel some mild pain.

When you release your muscles, let all the tightness and pain flow out completely. Fully enjoy the relief that releasing a muscle group brings. Focus your attention on the good feeling in the muscles, compared to when they were tensed.

You will now tighten your facial muscles. Scrunch up your entire face. Lower your forehead and wrinkle your nose. Tighten your eyes and eyebrows. Contract the muscles in your cheeks. Clamp your jaw and lips tightly shut and press your tongue hard against the top of your mouth. Hold it; two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight... and release.

You will now tighten the muscles in your neck and shoulders. Raise your shoulders as if you were a turtle trying to get in its shell. Press your chin down into your chest. Hold it; two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight... and release.

You will now tighten the muscles in your chest. Crossing your arms, use each hand to press against the opposite shoulder to get a full contraction in the chest. Hold it; two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight... and release.

You will now tighten the muscles in your upper back. Really arch your back. Extend your arms as far as you can. Reach toward the ceiling, pulling your shoulders forward and stretching the muscles across your upper back. Hold it; two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight... and release.

You will now tighten the muscles in your stomach. Blow all of the air out of your lungs and suck your abdominal muscles in, flexing them as hard as you can. Hold it; two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight... and release.

You will now tighten the biceps muscles in your upper arm. Bring your fingers to your shoulders and contract the biceps muscles. Hold it; two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight... and release.

You will now tighten the muscles in your hands and forearms. Hold your arms straight out in front of you and make tight fists. Hold it; two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight... and release.

You will now tighten the muscles in your buttocks. Clench the muscles so that your pelvis rises slightly upward. Hold it; two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight... and release.

You will now tighten the muscles in your thighs and hamstrings. Lock your knees and contract your thigh muscles as hard as you can. Really feel the muscles stretch down the back of your legs. Hold it; two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight... and release.

You will now tighten the muscles in your calves. Contract the calf muscles by pulling your toes toward your face. Hold it; two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight... and release.

You will now tighten the muscles in your feet. Point your toes away from your face to create tension in the arches of your feet. Hold it; two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight...and release.”

Relaxing Visualization

“Now you will picture your body as being totally relaxed. With your eyes closed, imagine that a warm, soothing, liquid is seeping through every part of your body, causing you to feel very, very, heavy.

Picture the warm liquid seeping in through the top of your head... many people don't realize that tension often starts in the little muscles of the scalp, so I want you to think about those little muscles and the skin of your scalp and just allow them to let go and relax.

Now, as the warm liquid seeps through all the muscles of your face, just let them go slack... your forehead and your eyes and eyelids... the cheeks, mouth and jaw muscles... it's a wonderful feeling when you let your face totally relax, because you can actually feel the skin settling, smoothing out... It might mean that your mouth opens slightly, but whatever is best to you, just let it happen... unclenching your teeth and relaxing your tongue... The more you relax in your body, the more you can relax in your mind...

Now picture the warm liquid seeping into your neck and shoulder muscles, and into the tops of your arms, letting all tensions drain away as it seeps on down through your elbows... into your forearms... down through your wrists and into your hands... all the way down into the very tips of your fingers and tips of your thumbs... causing all those muscles let go and relax...

Now think about your breathing, noticing that you're breathing even more steadily, even more slowly, as you relax more and more. You can let any tension in the chest area simply drain away as the warm liquid seeps through your chest and on down to your stomach muscles, causing those muscles to relax, too...

Now the warm liquid seeps down into your back, the long muscles on either side of the spine. Just let those muscles relax... and your waist... and your main thigh muscles, as it seeps on down through your knees, down through the shins and calves. Just allow all those areas to relax and let go, as it seeps on down through your ankles, through your feet, into the very tips of your toes... All the muscles of your body are now beautifully relaxed. You are totally at ease and very lazy."

Going into the Alpha State

(The Alpha State is the level of consciousness you experience right before falling asleep. This is the state at which your mind is the most impressionable).

"To enter a deeper state of relaxation, imagine that you are going down a staircase. With each step down you are getting more and more relaxed. Count backward from ten to one as you slowly descend the stairs. Ten.... nine.... eight.... seven.... six.... five.... four.... three.... two.... one. Now you are feeling a profound sense of well-being and your mind is clear and alert. You are totally relaxed and calm.

Picturing an Imaginary Retreat

"Now you will imagine a relaxing place where you can enjoy the quiet, the joy, and a sense of tranquility.

With your eyes closed, picture yourself entering a place of ultimate relaxation that no one knows about but you. You are walking along a dirt path in a forest beside a stream of cool running water. The water is clear and you can see the forms of rocks below the stream's currents. Tall trees are all around you providing shade from the sunlight that peeks through their branches. You can hear birds chirping and see butterflies fluttering through the air.

After walking for a while, you stop to lie down in some grass by the stream. As you lie back in the grass, you close your eyes and focus on the sound of water flowing gently by. The gurgling of the stream and the chirping of the birds bring you a deep sense of peace as you relax alone, surrounded by nature. You smell the fragrant aroma of the pine trees wafting through the air.

You don't have to do anything or be anything here. No one will ask you to do anything or expect anything from you. In fact, no one will ever find you here. You are completely free to lie down and relax for as long as you want to stay here. You feel your body go limp as you lie on your back in the grass without a care in the world."

(Pause for 30-45 seconds)

Creating a Relaxation Reflex

"You can return to this quiet, tranquil place in your mind any time you want. You can do this by choosing a key word or phrase that will bring you back to this place every time you say it. You may choose one word such as 'peace' or 'calm.' If you want, you may choose a reassuring phrase like 'I am totally relaxed.'

(Short pause)

Now, with your eyes closed, focus on your cue word(s) in your mind. If you feel tension anywhere in your body just relax those muscles, letting them go.

(Short pause)

Now take notice of your breathing. Make sure that you are breathing deeply and from the lower abdomen. Feel your stomach and chest moving in and out with slow, even breaths. Feel yourself getting more and more relaxed each time you breathe.

(Short pause)

As you take deep, regular breaths, say the words 'breathe in' to yourself each time you inhale and 'relax' (or your cue word or phrase) each time you exhale.

Focus all of your attention on the words you say as you inhale and exhale, and on the process of breathing. Each time you say 'relax,' (or your cue word or phrase) let the meaning of the word fill your consciousness, leaving no room for any fearful thoughts. Continue to breathe this way, repeating the word 'relax' (or your cue word or phrase) for several minutes.

Assume a passive attitude without worrying how well you are doing. It is natural for thoughts to come and go, so if you find yourself thinking about other things, gently bring your awareness back to your word or phrase."

(Take two to three minutes to breathe and say our cue word or phrase)

Coming out of the Alpha State

"You are now totally relaxed and in control of your thoughts. You are feeling rested and refreshed. Now you will count from one to five, and at the count of five you will open your eyes and be wide awake. One, two...you are slowly returning, three...at the count of five you will open your eyes, four...you are feeling confident and calm...five. When you are ready, get up slowly and return to your day."