

Calming Fearful Patients

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Before any lumbar stabilization, AquaStretch, Ai Chi, or orthopedic muscle re-education can occur, our clients must be comfortable with (and aware of) all aspects of the water. We cannot create re-patterning with a tense muscle or a nervous body. We have found that dealing with the emotional and cognitive elements first and foremost seems to enhance outcomes for many individuals. Come to this session and learn how to apply the concepts of gradual exposure therapies and ways to embed these principles in those patients' programs who exhibit signs of fear. Essential components in the process include (a) teaching relaxation techniques such as breathing exercises, progressive muscle relaxation, and/or positive mental imagery, (b) emphasizing mindfulness ("staying in the moment"), and creating small aquatic steps for a smooth and non-threatening journey to pool happiness.

In the pool attendees will begin by engaging in a series of relaxation techniques that include deep breathing exercises, progressive muscle relaxation (PMR), and imaging. Next, eight (8) major categories of water movements will be presented while attendees simultaneously learn how to help clients maintain an *anxiety-free* state of being using systematic desensitization. During systematic desensitization a person is gradually introduced to the water without experiencing fear. This is achieved by creating a hierarchy (small aquatic steps) for each client or group of clients. A hierarchy is similar to a teaching progression but is highly customized to fit the clients' needs. The following is an example of a hierarchy that was used to help a client with traumatic brain injury learn to back float without fear:

- (1) Back floating with assistance
- (2) Back floating unassisted
- (3) Back floating unassisted while exhaling out of my nose
- (4) Back floating unassisted, exhaling out of my nose while putting my chin to my chest
- (5) Back floating unassisted, exhaling out of my nose, putting my chin to my chest while simultaneously bringing my knees to my chest
- (6) Back floating unassisted, exhaling out of my nose, putting my chin to my chest while simultaneously bringing my knees to my chest and holding myself in a "ball" for at least 3 seconds (this allowed adequate time for rotation, from a horizontal to vertical position, to occur)
- (7) Back floating unassisted, exhaling out of my nose, putting my chin to my chest while simultaneously bringing my knees to my chest, holding myself in a "ball" for at least 3 seconds until I see my feet
- (8) Back floating unassisted, exhaling out of my nose, putting my chin to my chest while simultaneously bringing my knees to my chest, holding myself in a "ball" for at least 3 seconds until I see my feet then placing my feet on the pool bottom
- (9) Back floating unassisted, exhaling out of my nose, putting my chin to my chest while simultaneously bringing my knees to my chest, holding myself in a "ball" for at least 3 seconds until I see my feet, placing my feet on the pool bottom and extending my arms to balance in an upright position
- (10) From an assisted standing position, "falling down" backwards into a floating position, exhaling out of my nose, putting my chin to my chest while simultaneously bringing my

knees to my chest, holding myself in a “ball” for at least 3 seconds until I see my feet, placing my feet on the pool bottom, extending my arms to balance in an upright position and walking to safety (client had not yet begun step 10 in her hierarchy)

Categories of water movements to be covered are; 1) water adjustment, 2) breath control, 3) buoyancy on the front, 4) buoyancy on the back, 5) propulsion on the front, 6) propulsion on the back, 7) changing positions (reversals, turning over), and 8) water entries (jumping/diving in - depth permitting). Sample movements from each category may include (but not limited to):

1) Water adjustment

- Water walking (slow, deliberate)

2) Breath control

- At the side (fingertips on the edge, exhale as you submerge vertically, inhale when mouth reaches the surface, repeat several times in a row)
- In open water (same as at the side but feet are on the pool bottom)
- Seated position in open water (legs extended out in front (lawn chair pose), use gentle downward arm sweeps to clear chin and take a breath, sink back down into the water while exhaling [sit back down in your lawn chair], repeat several times in a row)

3) Buoyancy on the front

- Side of pool (fingertips on the edge while fully relaxing the body; release all tension)
- Recovery (chin and knees to chest, see your feet, stand up)
- Suspended with recovery (same as above but in open water)

4) Buoyancy on the back

- Side of pool (fingertips on the edge, body against the wall, tops of feet on pool bottom, extend arms if comfortable)

- Recovery (chin to chest [by placing the face in the water] and knees to chest simultaneously, let the body rotate from horizontal to vertical by holding for at least three (3) seconds, see your feet, stand up)
 - Suspended with recovery (same as above but in open water)
- 5) Propulsion on the front (gentle arm sweeps that start over head and move to the sides of the body, recover by sliding fingertips up the torso followed by reaching over head to starting position)
- 6) Propulsion on the back (begin with arms at the side, slide fingertips up the sides of the body then make a “T” with the arms followed by sweeping arms back to the thighs [starting position] – these are the same arm movements used in the elementary backstroke)
- 7) Changing positions
- Reversals (begin in a back floating position with fingertips on the edge, drift away from the wall, perform a back float recovery until prone, return to wall using gentle arms sweeps on the front)
 - Turning over
 - Front to back – dip one shoulder, turn head in the opposite directions, keep arms and hands under water throughout the turn
 - Back to front – dip one shoulder, turn head in the same direction, keep arms and hands under water throughout the turn
- 8) Water entries

- From the side (place one hand on the deck, scoot to the edge and slip off the side while staying in contact with the side, land on feet while absorbing the shock)
- Diving (in the deep end begin on the first rung of the ladder then move to seated dive on the side, kneeling dive, tip-in dive and finally standing dive)

Repeat activities in deep water (try skills 1 through 8 in the deep water – start in water just over the head).

In the classroom, participants will learn the theory behind systematic desensitization by reviewing and discussing research studies that have successfully utilized this process. Attendees will also practice creating hierarchies (small aquatic steps) based on real-life examples. Lastly, attendees will be asked to share what strategies and/or methods they have used in their professional practice to help clients who are afraid in water.