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Practicing Internal Strengthening: Managing Your Stress Through Relaxation Training (Session 9 of the Treatment Manual)

To meditate means to go home to yourself. Then you know how to take care of the things that are happening inside you, and you know how to take care of the things that happen around you. Thich Nhat Hanh (Vietnamese Buddhist Monk and Peace Activist; 1926–Present)

Session 9 continues with the practice of internal strengthening by emphasizing stress management and relaxation training. In doing so, clients are provided with psychoeducation about how stress affects health and performance. Clients are also taught a number of relaxation techniques that they can choose from to help center themselves and internally strengthen. Practice is a critical component of stress management and relaxation training. Clients complete a scheduling exercise that is structured similarly to that presented in Session 8 regarding planning healthy activities. However, instead of scheduling healthy activities, they develop a realistic program for integrating relaxation exercises into their lives. The goals of Session 9 include the following:

- Weekly check-in and review of take-home exercises;
- Understand the impact of stress on your health and mood;
- Learn relaxation techniques;
- Practice relaxation training;
- Complete internal strengthening (relaxation) exercises before next session.

These session goals fall within the following chapter goals:

- Continue to consolidate gains through the use of weekly take-home exercises and practice
 - Weekly check-in and review of take-home exercises
- Psychoeducation about stress
 - Understand the impact of stress on your health and mood
- Strengthening the internal self through mindfulness and relaxation techniques
 - Learn relaxation techniques
 - Practice relaxation training
- Complete internal strengthening (relaxation) exercises before next session.

CHAPTER GOAL #1: CONTINUE TO CONSOLIDATE GAINS THROUGH THE USE OF WEEKLY TAKE-HOME EXERCISES AND PRACTICE

During this check-in, clients are asked to review how their week went with their therapist and discuss their take-home internal strengthening and healthy activities exercises. Because the treatment program was limited to 12 sessions for the clinical trial, this is the only session that includes a review of healthy activity engagement.

Therefore, it is important for the therapist to capitalize on this opportunity and help ensure that clients will continue engaging in healthy activities on their own for the duration of the treatment program.

Weekly Check-In and Review of Take-Home Exercises

During the weekly check-in and review of take-home exercises, clients are asked about their successes and difficulties with engagement in healthy activities. Therapists and clients discuss how they felt while trying out various activities, which activities helped lift their mood, and which activities fostered a sense of inner strength and balance. They are also asked which activities were least beneficial, and to brainstorm other activities to try in future weeks that may be more helpful. In addition, this is also an important time to troubleshoot obstacles and barriers that prevented them from activity engagement.

For example, if scheduling was an issue (eg, they scheduled activities in the morning but were not able to get out of bed because that's when their depression is worst), therapists should brainstorm with the client a schedule that's more feasible and increases the likelihood of completion. Recommending different cueing strategies can also help remind clients of their activity schedule and help them break cycles of rumination or loss of motivation (eg, if a single alarm clock is not sufficient, try multiple alarm clocks placed in different parts of the room, and also open the blinds or curtains so it is harder to stay in bed all day long). Utilizing concrete strategies is very important when working with severely depressed populations, as well as with Asian heritage populations, who tend to expect and respond well to concrete therapeutic strategies. These adaptations are essential and can help improve engagement, activity completion, and the effectiveness of treatment.

CHAPTER GOAL #2: PSYCHOEDUCATION ABOUT STRESS

Stress acts as a risk factor and precursor to a large number of physical and mental health problems. It plays a major role in triggering the onset of most mental illnesses. Regarding depression, stress triggers the onset, reinforces the continuation, and increases risk for recurrence. Providing psychoeducation about stress and stress management is an essential part of effective therapy, and aligns well with Asian cultural values emphasizing the importance of education. Although stress plays a major role in nearly every physical and mental disorder, very few people learn about the impact of stress or how to manage it during their primary schooling years. This is especially true of the education provided in many Asian heritage cultures, where the focus on stress and mental health is largely underrepresented. Because education within Asian cultures does not usually focus on the risks stress poses to mental health, it is important to educate Asian heritage populations about general and specific issues related to stress. This is important when culturally tailoring mental health treatments for Asian heritage populations.

This may also help quell the awkward silences that some Asian heritage clients feel when they go to psychotherapy because it provides more structure and direction—which helps some clients feel at greater ease. This is also an important cultural adaptation for Asian heritage populations because they tend to be more goal-oriented and less educated about these issues when they do come in for treatment. The treatment manual utilizes a systematic approach to learn about different types of stress, its impact on health and performance, identification of a person's stress levels, and how to manage stress in an effective manner. With populations that are more familiar with these issues, comprehensive coverage of these topics may not be as necessary. However, most populations can benefit from an effective psychoeducational program that is paired with intervention and prevention strategies.

Understand the Impact of Stress on Your Health and Mood

In this section, therapists teach clients about different types of stressors and their impact on health and mood. Specifically, clients learn that stress is natural and normal, and that everybody experiences stress in their lives. Stress is ubiquitous, which makes it impossible for people to go through their lives without experiencing it in some form or another. Clients learn about detrimental effects of stress in the manual. They learn how it can affect someone's energy level, happiness, health, and a variety of mental health problems such as anxiety and

depression. They also learn that when we experience stress, it is important for us to let it go and engage in healthy coping. Stress in many Asian cultures (pronounced *yāli* in Mandarin Chinese—壓力) means pressure pushing down upon you. Letting things go (*fàngxià* in Mandarin Chinese—放下) is important to help release the pressure pushing down upon you.

Clients receive education regarding three primary types of stress (ie, episodic stress, chronic stress, and daily hassles). The manual provides a list of a number of stresses in each category. Episodic stressors include losing a job, getting robbed, a death of a loved one, being sued, moving to a new place, going through a divorce, being in a natural disaster, and being physically abused or sexually assaulted. Chronic stresses include unemployment, stressful working environments, language problems, immigration stress, transportation problems, difficulties making friends or finding a partner, caring too much about what other people think, being taken advantage of, academic pressure, being separated from family, and problems with your visa and residency. Daily hassles include cleaning the house, paying the bills, finding childcare, running errands, time management, taking care of others, cooking dinner, and picking up kids.

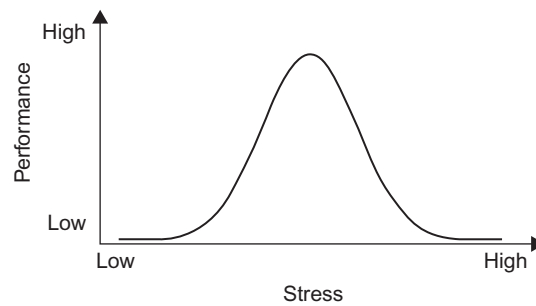
In addition, the manual talks about how each of these different categories of stress is interrelated. For example, an episodic stress, such as losing your job can quickly become a chronic stress if a person isn't able to find another job quickly. Another example would be if a person becomes injured or develops a health problem. This can be an episodic stress that quickly turns into a chronic stress if the health problems persist. Legal stresses are also an episodic stress, which can turn into chronic stress. The cumulative or total amount of stress a person experiences is called their total stress burden. Clients are asked to list stresses that they are facing. Space is provided to write down three different stressors in each of the three different stress categories. This active learning approach to psychoeducation can be very effective with Asian heritage populations.

In addition to general psychoeducation about stress, the treatment manual culturally adapts a Western stress management module by including ethnic- and immigrant-specific stressors. These include separation from family, language barriers, experiences with discrimination, transferability of educational degrees, and difficulty finding jobs for many of the aforementioned reasons. Other ethnocultural stressors are related to the immigration stress of residency and citizenship, such as visa and green card issues and being undocumented. Difficulty finding partners because of smaller ethnic dating pools, ethnocentrism, and willingness or unwillingness to date between and within groups are examples of ethnocultural stressors that immigrants and ethnic minorities may experience. Moreover, gendered and dating stresses can be especially harmful because of ethnic stereotypes of Asian heritage populations (ie, women are subservient and submissive, and men are emasculated leading to difficulties in dating and finding a suitable life partner). Stress can also influence relationships, which makes it important that therapists and clients discuss how the different stresses clients suffer from impact their social and family lives. This is particularly important for Asian heritage populations who tend to be more collectivistic and have an interdependent cultural value orientation. Inclusion of these ethnic- and immigration-specific stresses is an important cultural adaptation, and is part of Domain 6 of the Psychotherapy Adaptation Modification Framework (PAMF).

After learning about different types of stress and the specific stressors that the client is experiencing, the manual asks the client to evaluate how stressed they are on a scale from 1 to 9. Therapists teach clients that some stress can be beneficial and can help people work harder and perform better. Although the manual only goes through a basic review of stress, therapists can expand their psychoeducation about stress by covering a number of additional issues. For example, "eustress" is characterized as being good stress that can help motivate people, as well as enhance attention and concentration. Usually "eustress" occurs in moderation and is not overwhelming, nor does it disable or impair one's performance or ability to function effectively.

Negative stresses are known as "distress" and can negatively affect a person's physical and mental health. "Distress" creates unpleasant feelings that affect a person's mood, feelings of centeredness, emotional stability, and performance. It contributes to a person's overall stress burden, and can be overwhelming and affect a person's performance and efficacy. Stress is extremely subjective and a person's psychiatric history, personality, predispositions, and vulnerabilities may determine whether some stressors can enhance or disable performance.

Clients are taught about the Yerkes Dodson law, more commonly known as the stress–performance curve. With a little bit of stress, a person's performance increases and improves. However, with too much stress, performance starts deteriorating and has a detrimental impact on a variety of outcomes. This is illustrated in the treatment manual, which utilizes the figure presented below. Clients are asked to evaluate how stress has influenced their lives, their ability to function effectively, and perform well in their everyday responsibilities and tasks.



Clients are taught that a major focus of psychotherapy is to help people effectively manage their stress levels so that they do not become overwhelming and negatively affect their lives. Providing clear and concrete examples of how psychotherapy might help a client is a very important cultural adaptation for Asian heritage populations because of the common belief that psychotherapy is not helpful. Highlighting real-world benefits can help engage clients and increase understanding and belief in the importance of attending therapy on a regular basis to help manage their life problems. Discussing these issues in a concrete fashion helps clients reframe and be more strategic in their approach to stress management. This also helps them focus on how they might address their problems in different ways. For example, becoming less impatient, being more assertive, and even engaging in more exercise and healthful activities have been shown to have significant benefits on stress and mood.

For clients who are more highly educated, higher functioning, or who seem like they would benefit from additional psychoeducation, providing even more detailed information on stress research and psychological disorders may be valuable. For example, many of my clients benefit from discussing the stress–vulnerability hypothesis, the notion that each of us is vulnerable to stress and developing mental health problems. Whether we develop problems or not can depend on our overall health, resilience, and vulnerability to life stressors.

The stress–vulnerability hypothesis, also known as the diathesis–stress hypothesis, posits that everybody has some kind of genetic predisposition or vulnerability to develop health and mental health problems (Burcusa & Iacono, 2007). The magnitude of vulnerability may vary from person to person. Vulnerability may increase or decrease depending on a person’s family background, upbringing, development, personality, trauma, stress level, coping style, support system, and various life situations. The relationship between stress and psychiatric disorders has been empirically validated and confirmed through scientific research. Specifically, we know that health and mental health problems arise when a person’s resilience has been worn down, resulting in increased stress–vulnerability.

One metaphor that I created and often give clients that has been highly effective in my clinical practice is what I call the “water filling the glass” metaphor. Specifically, we can think of our resilience, vulnerability, and stress like a glass filled with various levels of water. The level of water in the cup and how much more water the glass can handle before it overflows is our resilience–vulnerability threshold. The water line shifts downward when we are well rested, and when we have more social support, feel happier, exercise more often, are more content with life, and feel emotionally stable and balanced. The line shifts upward or the water levels in the glass rise when we encounter different stresses and social conflicts. When clients have family psychiatric histories, then their baseline threshold of water may start off higher than somebody without said history. Therefore, those who are more vulnerable and less resilient need to be more proactive in taking care of their mental health and reducing their stress levels. When our total stress burden reaches the maximum that we can handle, this indicates that our resilience and coping methods have been maximized, and the water in the glass overflows. When we overflow, we develop physical and mental health symptoms such as depression, anxiety, panic attacks, psychotic symptoms, and even anger problems as we become more easily frustrated (see the figure below).



The goal of psychotherapy and effective stress management is to help people figure out how to lower their water lines, decrease vulnerability, and increase resilience. In psychodynamic therapies, the therapist acts as a container to help manage the client's stresses and difficulties. Part of effective psychotherapy is helping clients change their stress–vulnerability threshold (eg, lower their water line), but also to help the client increase the size of their container so that they can handle and hold more stress without overflowing. Both of these goals are especially important since many psychiatric disorders are chronic and/or recurrent, and learning how to cope effectively with life difficulties can play a major role in reducing future episodes. Providing concrete examples such as the one above helps motivate clients, increases buy-in, and provides important goals for the client to strive toward. Utilizing metaphors such as this is an important cultural adaptation, and can be especially effective when working with Asian heritage populations given their problem-focused nature, lack of exposure to psychotherapy, misconceptions about mental illness and treatment, and the need to more immediately experience the benefits of treatment. These metaphors also help bridge clinical issues with cultural beliefs to facilitate greater understanding.

Managing our stress levels is a necessary part of internal strengthening and helping clients feel relaxed and balanced. When a person's total stress burden becomes overwhelming, clients overtax what is called their allostatic stress load and the negative impact on health becomes quite salient. In addition, when people have experienced chronic stress for a long time, the stress weathering hypothesis tells us that their resilience wears down. These are important issues to discuss with the client so that they understand that the deleterious effects of stress are scientifically proven. It is also important that they understand that one of the primary goals of psychotherapy is to improve the manner in which we manage and cope with stress.

Therapists can also discuss psychological scarring theories which have also been supported by empirical research (Burcusa & Iacano, 2007). Specifically, depression is a recurrent disorder and can be triggered by stress when our vulnerability thresholds have been reached, or can even recur in the absence of stress. One way to think about depression recurrence is by comparing it to cancer recurrence. Similar to psychotherapy effectively treating depression, chemotherapy can be effective in treating cancer. Sometimes the cancer comes back because the overall stress in one's life is too great, making the person vulnerable to the effects of stress and increasing the likelihood of cancer cells returning. However, sometimes even though one is not stressed out and has sufficient support, the cancer cells spontaneously return because of previous scarring or residual cancer cells that survived.

Similarly, when a person recovers from a depressive episode, their depression can also spontaneously recur because there has been some psychological scarring, or it could recur because stress acts as a trigger. Understanding factors that increase the recurrence of depression is very important for client psychoeducation and is an important therapeutic strategy for increasing client engagement and participation in treatment. Utilizing physical health metaphors that provide a comparative analogy to mental illness can be an effective cultural adaptation for Asian heritage populations, since they are more likely to understand the importance of treating physical illness compared to mental illness, which is heavily stigmatized.

Finally, therapists can also teach clients about the theory of stress generation (Burcusa & Iacano, 2007). Specifically, there is a body of research showing that once a person becomes depressed, there is increased likelihood that they will generate or create new stressors that reinforce their problems. For example, once a person is depressed, they may feel so down that they decide not to go to work and eventually they lose their job. Similarly, a person may feel so down that they don't go to class, complete their homework, and as a result receive poor grades. Consequently, they feel bad about themselves and their parents may become upset at them. As a result, the cycle of depression is worsened as they continue to struggle not only with their depression, but also with the resulting sense of failure.

Stress generation can also be exemplified by other situations. For example, when a parent or partner is depressed and emotionally unavailable, this inevitably increases social conflict and relationship dissatisfaction. When somebody is depressed, they act in ways that increase the risk for conflict and become less effective in communicating, managing disagreements, and being supportive. As a result, additional interpersonal stress is generated and exacerbates the client's depression. Providing psychoeducation on stress generation dynamics fosters insight and provides incentives to prevent and intervene when problems develop. Moreover, it normalizes these processes and helps shed light on the problem.

CHAPTER GOAL #3: STRENGTHENING THE INTERNAL SELF THROUGH MINDFULNESS AND RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

After providing stress education, the manual focuses on equipping clients with different tools and skills for relaxation. The goals of these relaxation techniques are to help clients manage their stress, feel more centered and balanced, and to cultivate inner strength. No matter which techniques clients choose to try, or which techniques therapists choose to teach, it is important to help clients understand that stress management and engagement in some form of relaxation is not only beneficial, but a necessity. The importance of practicing healthy coping strategies for improving physical and mental health is also highlighted to the client.

Stress management techniques can help manage the effects of chronic stress, and also help lower one's stress hormones (ie, adrenaline and cortisol). Stress hormones play a central role in increasing blood pressure and blood sugar. Stress can also exacerbate a number of physical symptoms, such as stomach problems, sleep difficulties, fatigue, weight control issues, heart disease, and breathing difficulties. Stress can suppress and damage the immune system, increase inflammation, and negatively impact reproductive and growth processes. Similarly, stress can increase a variety of psychological symptoms, such as anger, frustration, depression, anxiety, panic, paranoia, and impairment in memory or concentration. Helping clients understand that we will always encounter stress, but that our suffering and how we cope and deal with those problems is within our power is very important. For example, Buddha once said, "Pain is certain, suffering is optional."

Relaxation and meditational techniques can help increase the presence of health-improving hormones (eg, endorphins, dehydroepiandrosterone (DHE), and human growth hormone), which reduce pain, decrease the likelihood of developing a variety of stress-influenced diseases (eg, diabetes, heart disease, obesity, arthritis, osteoporosis, and chronic fatigue), improve memory and concentration, improve immune response, and facilitate healthy aging. In addition, these hormones help increase neurotransmitters that typically help reduce stress reactions, including serotonin, GABA, and melatonin—which are responsible for depression, anxiety, and sleep difficulties. Highlighting the health consequences that arise from failure to manage stress effectively and underscoring the benefits of relaxation techniques can increase client buy-in to learn beneficial skills and also increase practice and engagement. This psychoeducational and scientific approach, which focuses on the benefits and detrimental effects of not managing one's stresses appropriately, is an important cultural adaptation, especially given Asian culture's valuing of education and Asian cultural emphasis on cause and effect (pronounced *yīnguǒ* in Mandarin Chinese—因果). A very important cultural adaptation is to provide biological explanations, which can be very beneficial and reassure Asian heritage clients about the importance of the mental health strategies promoted by the manual.

Learn Relaxation Techniques

In the section below, clients learn about various relaxation techniques, including centering (meditation techniques), relaxation (progressive muscle relaxation (PMR)), energy (closeness with nature), mindfulness (massaging one's mind), reflection on positive moments, cleansing or soothing activities, and other techniques. Another cultural adaptation is to include relaxation techniques that are commonly found in Asian heritage cultures, which are typically not included in Western stress management programs. Culture-specific relaxation strategies are extant cultural strengths and part of Domain 6 of the PAMF. Nevertheless, many of these Asian healing techniques have recently been found to be beneficial and are currently being incorporated into Western health and mental health management—which also attests to the benefits of studying and understanding healing practices across cultures. By studying culture, we improve our ability to culturally integrate techniques for health

improvement and better understand how culture-specific phenomena (ie, emics) can be turned into culturally universal healing techniques (ie, etics).

Centering: Meditation Techniques

The goal of meditational techniques is to help people feel very relaxed, balanced, and centered. Incorporating meditational techniques into stress management and relaxation training is an important cultural adaptation, especially for Asian heritage populations, because meditation has deep roots in many Asian heritage cultures, philosophies, religions (eg, Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, Shintoism, Islam, Jainism, and Confucianism), and traditional medicines and healing systems (eg, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), Ayurvedic medicine, Siddha medicine, Unani medicine, acupuncture, and Zen meditation). There are many different types of meditation, each of which may share similar and unique strategies that promote health and mental health benefits. Some focus primarily on breathing techniques, while others are guided meditations that pair breathing with music, chance, sounds, visualizations, and guided movements. Others involve mindful and meditational movement exercises such as yoga or doing Tai Chi in the park. Therapists explore the client's previous experiences with meditation, revisit meditational practices that were beneficial in the past, and/or teach new meditational skill sets when helping the client implement this relaxation strategy. Meditational techniques can help clients expel negative energy or Qi, and thus help clients heal through the power of the breath, which at a physiological level helps regulate the parasympathetic and sympathetic nervous systems and has other neuroscientific benefits. Sometimes clients have difficulty practicing meditation or rationalize by saying that they do not have time to practice. Utilizing culturally adapted strategies and connecting the importance of meditation to different role models, metaphors, or quotes may be beneficial. For example, the Thai Buddhist monk Ajahn Chah once said "If you have time to breathe, you have time to meditate."

Relaxation: PMR

This is a commonly used therapeutic technique that has been widely incorporated into Western psychotherapy. It consists of a series of tensing and releasing different parts of one's face, body, and extremities. Therapists are free to teach various types of PMR and to tailor it to the various parts of the bodies where clients hold more stress. For example, if clients have a lot of headaches, incorporation of tensing and releasing different aspects of the face may be beneficial. If clients hold a lot of tension in the shoulders, PMR that focuses more on the neck, shoulders, and scapula can provide targeted relief. Clients are taught to tense and relax different parts of the body for 10–15 s. However, the actual length of time can be collaboratively modified by the therapist and/or the client to achieve maximum benefits for the client's particular problem.

Energy: Closeness with Nature

An important part of culturally adapting therapy for Asian heritage populations is to incorporate techniques that focus on holistic methods to increase the connection with nature. This is a common emphasis in many traditional healing systems and beliefs about energy. This also supports many of the aforementioned metaphors and techniques previously presented in the manual. For example, in Session 2, the manual discusses the "sitting in the sun" technique, which helps clients increase their solar energy (pronounced *yángqì* in Mandarin Chinese—陽氣) and decrease their lunar energy (pronounced *yīnqì* in Mandarin Chinese—陰氣). This technique is revisited here to give clients more practice and an opportunity to consolidate their skills. It also reduces the need to practice too many additional techniques for those who are less familiar with therapy, and may be overwhelmed by the teaching of too many coping strategies. Therapists can collaborate with the client to figure out whether practicing previous techniques or learning new techniques will best suit the client's needs. This decision may be influenced by the client's severity of depression, emotional resources, and how beneficial previous techniques were.

Clients are reminded to visualize the energy of the sun warming their mind, body, and spirit, while lighting up the darkness of their depression. For those who have a lot of anger and frustration, the manual recommends using water techniques, such as sitting next to a fountain, river, waterfall, or ocean while letting the sound of running water cleanse their mind, body, and spirit. In addition, clients are told to notice the thoughts and worries running through their minds, and to let them go and notice them flow to more relaxing and positive places. The closeness with nature technique that the client and therapist choose may differ depending on the client's needs for relaxation or rejuvenation. For example, many clients may need to de-stress, but could also benefit from cultivating themselves or growing and raising fruits and vegetables to move beyond past traumas and heal themselves through mindful gardening. This type of culturally adapted intervention has already begun being integrated into therapy for different populations (eg, Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders) and various healthy living

communities. These important cultural adaptations may be especially beneficial for Asian heritage populations, but are also likely to resonate with other groups.

Mindfulness: Massaging One's Mind

Mindfulness is an important meditational technique that has been adopted from traditional Eastern practices. Mindfulness has recently been and continues to be integrated into different types of psychotherapy (eg, cognitive-behavioral therapy, dialectical behavioral therapy, and psychodynamic therapy). In some ways, it may be easier for Asians to transition to a mindfulness-based therapy because the techniques are more culturally familiar and congruent because they come from traditional Asian healing practices. In addition, mindfulness-based techniques may be more user-friendly to the general population than more traditional meditational techniques that require a higher level of practice, concentration, and expertise. Developing mindfulness can be an effective method of managing stress and anxiety. Moreover, it can pull clients out of the downward spiral of depressive and ruminative thinking by giving clients an alternative and calming coping method that cultivates focus and concentration. Incorporating mindfulness adapts Western psychotherapy and bridges extant Asian cultural strengths into the treatment.

The mindfulness technique provided in the treatment manual is called “massaging one’s mind’s eye.” I developed this technique to help clients focus on developing greater clarity and perspective through mindfulness, focus and attention, and/or massaging one’s third eye, which is located between one’s eyebrows. Historically, one’s metaphorical third eye (also commonly known as the mind’s eye) is associated with many religions and healing systems, including Hinduism, Ayurvedic medicine, Buddhism, Taoism, and TCM. In many Asian cultures, it is also called the third eye (pronounced *dīsānzhīyǎn* in Mandarin Chinese—第三隻眼), the spiritual eye (pronounced *tiānyǎn* in Mandarin Chinese—天眼), or the inner eye (pronounced *nèizàiyǎn* in Mandarin Chinese—內在眼). The third eye represents a critical chakra or focal point for energy. It is associated with not only greater clarity and perspective, but also higher levels of consciousness, clairvoyance, auras, spirituality, mindfulness, enlightenment, and connection with the universe and truth. Depending on the client’s belief system, greater or lesser emphasis can be placed on the different types of benefits of practicing mindfulness and having perspective when dealing with one’s emotions and life problems.

Reflecting on Positive Moments

The ability to reflect and focus on the positive is an essential cognitive skill that can help reduce anxiety, depression, worry, and rumination. The ability to reframe in a positive manner is positively associated with optimism and negatively correlated with pessimism. Reflecting on positive moments and thinking about the good things that have happened to us, or are currently happening to us, can help us reduce our stress levels, feel more centered, and improve our moods. Oftentimes when people are in a depressive cycle, they can reduce the intensity and length of their worry thoughts and depression by actively looking at memorable pictures, listening to songs associated with positive feelings and memories, and appreciating the positive things in their life that they are thankful for. The “Yes, But” technique that we previously learned about in Session 7 can also be integrated here to help clients positively reframe.

It is important to help clients recognize and understand the subjectivity involved in interpretation of events. The classic metaphor that a glass can be perceived as half-empty or half-full can be used to demonstrate the subjectivity of perception. Our interpretation of the objective reality (eg, the water level) is often influenced by our individual emotional state, stress levels, anxiety, centeredness, balance, and ability to relax. Emphasizing that interpretation is subjective to clients, and reinforcing the fact that as a consequence we can change and alter our perceptions, is an important clinical intervention. It is also important to reinforce the idea that clients can change their outlook and experiences of life by choosing to utilize either positive or negative mental filters when interpreting stressful events and situations. For example, Confucius once said, “The more man meditates upon good thoughts the better will be his world and the world at large.” Underscoring that we can take control over thoughts and empower ourselves is important for fostering hope and optimism.

Cleansing or Soothing Activities

Engaging in relaxing activities that help soothe our bodies and create a sense of cleansing and detoxification is important for life happiness and reduction of stress. Activities such as taking a hot bath or shower, sitting in a jacuzzi or sauna, or going to a spa can all help soothe the soul and help one feel cleaner, more relaxed, and rejuvenated. This can also be a target for cultural adaptation and a way to bridge extant cultural strengths. For example, in many Asian heritage cultures there are traditional spas or hot spring bathhouses (pronounced *wēnquán* in

Mandarin Chinese—温泉) where people can go not only to relax, but also to socialize and/or balance their inner energy. Cleansing and detoxifying in hot spring bathhouses (pronounced onsen in Japanese—温泉) is also heavily utilized and valued in Japanese culture. Korean culture also commonly uses spas (pronounced oncheon in Korean—온천) as a method of relaxation. Korean and other Asian heritage spas also often include mineral springs that are believed to have numerous health-promoting properties.

Hot springs and bathhouses are culturally effective methods for relieving stress. They are a place where people can reset from the worries of the outside world. They are also culturally sanctioned and nonstigmatized methods for mental and physical relaxation. They can be a supportive place for socially bonding with friends, families, and couples. In fact, many such spas and bathhouses are becoming more prolific throughout the United States, especially in areas with a large number of Asian Americans. Many non-Asians are also taking advantage of the health benefits of these facilities. In fact, Korean spas were recently promoted by Conan O'Brien in his discussion and visit to one with the Korean American actor Stephen Yeun from the *Walking Dead*. Encouraging Asian heritage clients to take advantage of these culturally sanctioned relaxation methods can be highly effective. If clients do not have time or resources to go to an external spa, then taking a hot shower or bath can also serve as stress relief during difficult moments or as a pre-bedtime ritual to help clients unwind, reduce negative thinking, and improve sleep. Meditating while sitting in a relaxing and cleansing body of water can enhance the health benefits of cleansing or soothing activities. Clients can also more easily engage and practice cognitive reframing in a relaxed setting.

Other Techniques

Obviously, the techniques listed above are not all inclusive. Rather, they are meant to be starting points where therapists can begin discussing which relaxation techniques may be most beneficial for individual clients. For example, massage can be extremely beneficial for mind–body ailments, and it is a healing tradition in many Asian heritage cultures (eg, Thai massage, Japanese shiatsu, and Chinese foot massage). Choosing which activity to learn or revisit is a collaborative process, and other techniques that the client or the therapist may find helpful can also be incorporated.

Practice Relaxation Training

In this in-session activity, therapists discuss with the client which relaxation techniques seem most appealing. They differentiate activities that they had previously practiced and found to be beneficial, those that they tried and did not practice long enough to receive the benefits, and those that they had not tried, but that they might find useful. Culturally adapting therapy to help clients understand stress management and relaxation training is an important psychoeducational focus. Culturally sanctioned methods are important cultural adaptations. After discussing which techniques might be the most beneficial, therapists provide guided practice to some of these skill sets with the client while in session. It is important for clients to be involved in the decision-making process in order for them to feel empowered to make choices that improve their health. This allows for focusing on activities that are most appealing, which helps increase the likelihood they will engage and practice them. Clients are taught that being able to relax is not always automatic, and that it may take some time and practice. However, it is important to underscore that they can achieve a greater sense of inner strength and balance if they do so. Part of our culturally adapting therapy for Asian heritage populations is to remind clients that there are direct negative effects and consequences of not managing stress through relaxation strategies. Furthermore, failure to manage stress can deteriorate inner strength and a person's ability to effectively manage life problems, which could potentially exacerbate and create more problems.

CHAPTER GOAL #4: COMPLETE INTERNAL STRENGTHENING (RELAXATION) EXERCISES BEFORE NEXT SESSION

This session concludes by discussing and developing a relaxation technique practice schedule. Specifically, clients are asked to complete internal strengthening (relaxation) exercises before the next session. They are asked to apply the skills that they learned in this session, and to practice them in everyday life so that they can consolidate their skill sets and experience the resulting benefits. They are also reminded that the therapist will discuss with them which ones were useful, which ones did not work as well, and the reasons why during the following

session. This is important because it reinforces practice and engagement, and reminds the client that the therapist will be checking in—thus adding some social pressure, which can be especially effective when working with Asian heritage populations because they generally value social relations and compliance with authority figures. Nevertheless, reducing barriers to completing take-home exercises is very important, especially since clients from all cultural backgrounds struggle with this when clinically depressed.

Utilizing great specificity in planning and scheduling is very important when working with clients who are less familiar with psychotherapy because it can increase take-home assignment completion. Moreover, the same scheduling sheet is used so as not to confuse the client with too many different types of worksheets—especially since many Asian heritage populations have had little exposure to psychotherapy and mental health “homework.” Therapists are asked to guide the client in scheduling specific days, times, and relaxation techniques.

In addition, they collaborate with the client and discuss potential barriers that may arise, and then brainstorm ideas for how to overcome those concrete and emotional barriers. Similar to the previous session, clients are reminded of the pleasure principle, and asked to rate their anticipated enjoyment and actual enjoyment—especially since most clients will rate anticipated enjoyment as being less than their actual enjoyment. This reinforcement is very important to breaking negative emotional cycles. Clients can benefit from practicing relaxation techniques that are therapeutic for a person’s physical and mental health. Emphasizing the interconnection and synergy between physical and mental health issues is also an important cultural adaptation, especially given the holistic and mind–body relationship emphasized in many Asian heritage populations, religions, and traditional medicines.

Reference

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