

## APPENDIX 2

# The Meaning and Implication of Key Events Form

**P**lease take a few moments to get into the right frame of mind to do this exercise. Find a private quiet place and take some deep slow breaths. Try to free yourself from the day's demands and pressures. Give yourself at least 30 undisturbed minutes for this task.

Once you are in the right place, take just a few minutes and focus your thoughts on the military experience that has affected you the most; the event that is most currently distressing and haunting. Do not focus on details, but on the fact that this thing happened. After doing this, use this form to write about *what this experience means to you* and *what is the implication of this experience* in terms of: (1) your *beliefs about yourself* (e.g., your self-worth, identity as a service member, or veteran, family member or friend, and so on); (2) *your beliefs about others* close to you (e.g., their trustworthiness); and (3) *your beliefs about how things work in the world* (e.g., fairness, justice). Feel free to write about any other issues that come to mind about the meaning and implication of this event. You do not need to fill all of these pages. Please bring this sheet with you to the next session.

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## APPENDIX 3

# Calming and Attention Focusing Techniques

In this appendix, we provide instructions for deep breathing and grounding strategies that clinicians can use to help patients manage in- and extrasession intense distress and loss of control, when applicable. The deep breathing content can be fashioned directly into a handout. The grounding instructions are written for clinicians to address in-session loss of control and severe dissociation.

### **DEEP, SLOW, DIAPHRAGMATIC BREATHING**

When we are tense or anxious, our muscles tense up and our breathing becomes *faster* and *shallower*. This response is hardwired; our bodies are getting ready to respond to a challenge or threat (this is called the “flight-or-fight response”). Fast breathing helps us survive serious threats by rapidly supplying oxygen to our muscles. However, if there is no real challenge or threat (i.e., if one’s life is not immediately in danger), one can “overbreathe,” which can bring on a number of physical sensations that include feeling out of breath and lightheaded or dizzy, and having a rapid

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heartbeat or chest pains. An effective way to reduce tension and help calm the mind is to practice deep, slow “diaphragmatic” breathing.

### *Benefits of learning this type of breathing*

1. It is very easy to learn and one can use this skill anytime, anywhere.
2. It helps one relax and manage tension and anxiety.
3. It helps one manage the times when one is triggered to recall distressing war experiences.

Learning relaxation skills does not hurt one’s ability to respond to serious and real threats when one needs to do so. This skill will only enhance one’s ability to take care of oneself in any situation, in part because it helps one to be rested and ready for the next challenge.

The goal is to use the diaphragm (a large muscle underneath the lungs, near the base of the ribs), to breathe while inhaling and exhaling *deeply and slowly*. When one breathes in using the diaphragm, one’s stomach extends all the way out as the abdomen expands. Upon exhaling, one’s abdomen is sucked back in as the stomach returns to its resting state.

Using the diaphragm for deep slow breathing is different than breathing from the top of one’s chest. When one is tense or anxious, one uses the small muscles between the ribs and those at the top of the chest to fill the lungs. This changes the balance of oxygen and carbon dioxide in the body by bringing in too much oxygen and depleting too much carbon dioxide. Deep, slow diaphragmatic breathing counters this process. Breathing slowly and deeply from the diaphragm also slows down the heart rate, helping one to reduce tension and anxiety.

Deep breathing is a skill that needs to be practiced. The practice of periodic deep breathing generally lowers stress. Once a person is good at it, another important benefit is applying deep breathing when one needs it most, during states of very high emotion or distress, when one feels things going out of control.

### *How to practice deep breathing*

- Find a quiet, comfortable place where you won’t be disturbed.
- *Slowly* breathe in cool, calming air, pushing your stomach out near your belly button. Keep your chest still.
- Exhale slowly and deliberately. Pause naturally between each breath.
- Breathe slowly but naturally, keeping each breath smooth and easy.

Many people find it easiest to breathe through their nose, but do whatever feels most comfortable and natural for you.

- When you breathe in, think the word “one” to yourself. Then, breathe out slowly and think the word “relax.” On your next breath, think “two” as you breathe in, and “relax” as you breathe out. Continue counting until you reach “ten,” then start over until you get to “ten” again.
- Do this exercise for a total of *at least 1 minute*.

When you practice, as yourself: How do you feel now? Compare how you feel now to the tension you felt when you began. Do you feel more clearheaded and relaxed? Do you have any more energy than you had when you began the activity?

### *Tips for deep breathing*

- Place one hand on your chest and one hand over your belly button. Breathe in and out so that only the hand on your abdomen moves, while the hand on your chest stays still.
- If you are having trouble breathing from your diaphragm, try “leading” each breath by pushing your stomach out. By making space for the air to fill, you are creating a natural vacuum that will draw the air in.
- If you are still having trouble, try practicing while lying on your back on the floor. Put a book on your belly and practice moving it up and down with each breath.
- It is important that you practice regularly, meaning *at least* once a day. The more you do it, the easier it will become, and the more you will benefit.
- You may not notice much difference in how relaxed you feel after you have done the breathing exercises today, but the more you practice, the calmer you’ll feel in situations that do not require you to be “geared up” and tense.
- As you get comfortable with slow deep breathing, try practicing it for *longer* periods of time and in *different situations*. For example, try it while you are sitting in traffic, standing in the checkout line, watching TV, or walking (you can time your breaths to your steps). The more you practice in different situations, *the better you will be at relaxing yourself whenever and wherever you need to do so*.

If at first you find the exercise difficult or frustrating, do not give up—deep breathing gets easier with time and practice. Your body may have

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been operating on “high alert” status for a while now, so you need to be patient as you train your body to relax and “reset” itself to a more relaxed level.

Once you have practiced this exercise several times (e.g., daily for at least a week or two), you can start to use this skill to manage times when you are triggered to recall distressing or painful combat and operational experiences, or when you are feeling anxious or angry. As soon as you notice that you are upset, try to step back from the situation and focus on taking slow deep breaths for as long as you need to, in order to calm down.

Taking control of breathing is a good way to calm down and restore focus. This is one reason that breathing is stressed in martial arts; it creates a body–mind connection. This connection helps control how well the body receives oxygen, reduces stress, and increases self-awareness. Controlled breathing allows people to gain control over their bodies, including emotional reactions.

## GROUNDING

In exposure therapy and adaptive disclosure, strong feelings are important change agents. Feelings need to run their natural course before they will subside, and there are times when it is safe and appropriate to do this. At other times, service members or veterans may need to maintain control over their emotions and focus on the task at hand. When a service member or veteran is so intensely immersed in an emotional experience that it is detrimental, the following *grounding* strategies can be used to restore focus. Therapists can guide patients through these steps to help them regain a sense of place and time, and to create distance, if necessary. Service members and veterans should also learn these strategies so that they can apply them when necessary in their lives outside the therapy context.

Keep your eyes open as you prepare to turn your attention from your inner world of distress to the calmer outside world. Look around you and see that you are safe—that there are no immediate threats to your life or safety. Notice that the thoughts and feelings that have made you feel unsafe do not belong where you are now. Now try to imagine putting a barrier between you and all of your unsafe feelings by wadding them up, stuffing them into a container, and sealing it. Next, imagine the container of your unsafe feelings being placed behind a thick concrete barricade far away from you.

Now look around the place where you are and name as many objects and colors as you can, one by one. Notice and name what is in front of you, to your left, to your right, behind you, above you, and beneath you. If you see any printed words, read them, then name each letter backward. Now

focus your thoughts on naming things you are interested in (e.g., sports teams, types of dogs, the names of entertainers or athletes, or TV shows). Count slowly forward (1 to 10) or backwards (10 to 1). Notice the pressure of your body on the ground or floor. Stretch and take a deep breath.

Check in with yourself, and if you are still feeling unsafe or your thoughts are unclear and unfocused, repeat these exercises.