

BODY SCAN

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Teaching the difference between tension/stress and relaxation.

1. How do you know when you're uptight versus relaxed? Let's practice noticing the difference.
2. Squeeze all the muscles in your face. Now the shoulders...the hands...the belly...the legs...the feet. Notice how you feel.
3. And then release all the tension. Now notice how you feel.

Bonus: Now try it one body part at a time. Squeeze just the face; release. Just the shoulders; release. Etc.

PHYSICAL EXAM CORRELATE: During your neurologic exam, check for symmetry, tone, and muscle strength as you ask the child to 1) squeeze their face and then release; 2) lift up their shoulders toward their ears, then release; 3) squeeze both clinician's hands as tightly as they can, then release; 4) pull clinician's arms toward them against clinician's resistance, then release; 5) lift each leg in turn against clinician's resistance, then release; and 5) kick out each leg in turn against clinician's resistance, then release.

ONGOING DISCUSSION: Ask about how the child manages stress.

APPLICATIONS: Grounding oneself in the physical self is a useful technique to return to the moment, diminishing ruminations about the past and worries about the future. For patients with many physical symptoms, with histories of trauma, and with strong emotional reactions, this practice may help to center their emotional responses to enhance self-regulation over time. It may help with tension or restlessness that contributes to insomnia or aggression.



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THE SCIENCE: Described in the context of progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) in the medical literature, this technique has shown efficacy for reducing anxiety and perceived stress as well as increasing relaxation; alongside these changes is a decrease in cortisol levels after only 5 sessions of training (Chellew et al. 2015, Stress). In a trial comparing Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and PMR for patients with medically unexplained physical complaints (Schroder 2013, Cogn Ther Res), both CBT and PMR led to significant and lasting improvement in symptoms, with reductions in anxiety and depression.



*Vermont Center for
Children Youth & Families*
Vermont Family Based Approach