

Holistic Relaxation and Health

The quest for and practice of peace is part of all the ancient religious traditions. The ancient scriptures tell us; 'Be still [relax, or let go] and know that I am God;..' Psalms 148:10; and the prophet tells us in Psalm 131 'Surely I have calmed and quieted my soul,/ Like a weaned child with his mother;/ Like a weaned child is my soul within me.'

The ability to be calm with a peaceful and hopeful attitude, knowing there is Someone bigger than ourselves in this universe, is one of the age old pursuits of man.

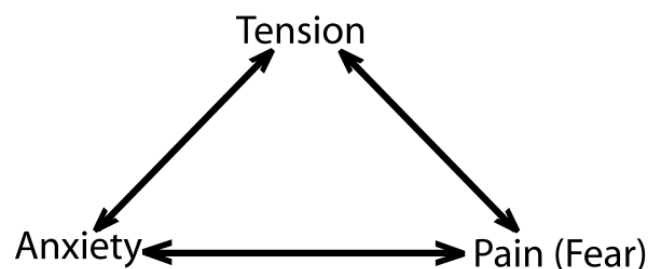
Our attention is the rudder of our mind and our mind is what tells our nervous system what to do. When our sensory perceptions are on overload, or when we are focusing on negative, catastrophic thoughts, the result is that our mind tells our body to produce stress hormones and these powerful chemicals, like adrenalin, surge through our entire body, preparing us for an emergency. This is called the 'Fight, Flight or Freeze' reaction. In a physical emergency we will physically fight, run for our life, or curl up in the foetal position—all tensed up with our hands over our head trying to protect ourselves until the threat passes.

The problem is when it is an emotional emergency we cannot do any of the three, we internalize the perceived threat and the chemicals our body is producing drive our blood pressure through the roof, upset our blood sugar levels and make our cholesterol go higher. Stress hormones will kill us if we have them in our blood over a long period of time. One author, S.I McMillan, in his book 'None of These Diseases' said 'It's not what you eat; it's what's eating you' seeking to emphasize the large influence our attitude and focus have on our life. One author of the 19th century put it this way:

Worry is blind and cannot discern the future. But [the Creator] sees the end from the beginning,.. Now, my brother, don't worry. Do not allow yourself to be kept up through unreasonable hours... You need rest for the brain, and you will break down unless you have rest.—E.G. White Letter 41, 1892.

Self control is the study of a life time. We tend to ignore what our bodies are telling us and rush through life trying to find superficial ways outside of ourselves to deal with the complex things inside ourselves. We generally seek to medicate in some way, be it chemical substances like alcohol or drugs, food, sex, entertainment, things, etc. The problem is these things only mask the deeper problems.

Generally there is a cycle that keeps us trapped. Drs Wise and Anderson in their landmark work dealing with chronic pelvic pain (A Headache in the Pelvis see www.pelvicpainhelp.com) illustrate it like this:



The more we focus on any one of these, the more it exacerbates (makes worse) the other two. The only way to escape is to break the cycle, and the only way to break the cycle is to accept, stop fighting. This is called 'Paradoxical Relaxation'. Paradox means: a statement that seems contrary to

common sense and yet is true. This concept is central to Alcoholics Anonymous; the first step to conquering the addiction is to admit you are powerless.

When you feel the tension, don't fight it, just accept it. Relaxing has to do with not exerting effort. In our western culture we generally think we need to 'do' something to achieve a result. When we try to fight the tension we are exerting effort and this actually holds the tension in our bodies—we can never relax this way. Once we accept that it is there and let it pass through, the system can relax.

Drs Wise and Anderson use a graphic illustration of this in their book: It's like walking down the street. There is a sea of faces, but we are going someplace, so we just let them pass, we focus on where we are going. This is the way with quieting the mind by stilling the body. We keep our attention fixed away from the thoughts that try to rush in and take over, we let them go past and stay focused on the tension in our body, one part at a time. Not trying to do anything about it, just being aware that it is there—just kind of hanging out with our body to see what's happening with it. This isn't meditation, sleeping or hypnosis, but a practice of self control. Shutting down the business of the nervous system for a few minutes allows the body to relax deeply, which allows healing to take place and the normal blood chemistry and function to re-establish itself. To understand this and actually do it effectively takes practice, and most of us won't do it unless we hurt a great deal, generally we want to find a quick fix, a pill or some other way to numb the pain, etc.

RSA Breathing

Respiratory Sinus Arrhythmia Breathing is a description of the relationship between heart rate and breathing. RSA can be a useful method to quickly quiet the sympathetic nervous system arousal, reduce anxiety and allow one to be at a deeper level of relaxation at the beginning of the relaxation session. This can be practiced anywhere, it doesn't need to be associated with a deep relaxation session and is a good tool to calming the nervous system at any time when a person can sit down for a few minutes.

About 6 breaths per minute is the average we are looking for, but 2 to 9 breaths per minute is the range. Comfort is the key, so this can be adjusted to suit the comfort level.

- Find your pulse
- Count how many beats in 15 seconds
- Multiply this by 4 (beats per minute)
- Divide heart rate by 6 (how many beats per complete breath to make 6 a minute)
- Divide by 2 (number of beats for each in and for each out)

If 60 beats per minute:

$$60/6=10$$

$$10/2=5$$

At this heart rate, 5 beats to breathe in, 5 beats to breathe out. The idea is to focus on the breathing, let everything else go past. This will quickly relax you and allow you to proceed to the next step, listening to your body.

After about 5 minutes of RSA breathing, find an area of tension in your body. Don't try to do anything about it, just focus your attention on it, the sensation. Remember, your 'job' now is to

quiet the nervous system by shutting down as much thought as possible. This is time for your nervous system to rest. Just feel with your body, if there is pain, don't focus on the pain, but on the tension that is behind the pain. As the tension begins to drop away, your body and mind may fight, may try to grab it back again, this is normal when we are not used to deep relaxation. There isn't any goal, nothing to have to do here, no time line to meet with physical accomplishment, we're just hanging out with our body, just feeling what is going on in the various places and allowing the tension to pass through us. As we learn how to 'not do anything' about the tension, it automatically relaxes and allows deep healing to take place. 15 minutes, or a half hour once or twice a day can work wonders. Most people in our busy world find it too hard to learn to direct the attention, but this is largely because we have been trained by the TV. If you watch you will notice that the scenes are changing constantly, we are kept on the edge of our seat by the rapid change of focus. Most of us live with a constant level of residual tension that never leaves us, and this deeply impacts our sense of well being. Generally, the more relaxed we can stay during the day, the better we will sleep at night.

This interesting story of deep relaxation is recorded in the gospel on Mark:

Mark 4:35-41

On the same day, when evening had come, He said to them, "Let us cross over to the other side." Now when they had left the multitude, they took Him along in the boat as He was. And other little boats were also with Him. And a great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that it was already filling. But He was in the stern, asleep on a pillow. And they awoke Him and said to Him, "Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?"

Then He arose and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace, be still!" And the wind ceased and there was a great calm. But He said to them, "Why are you so fearful? How is it that you have no faith?" And they feared exceedingly, and said to one another, "Who can this be, that even the wind and the sea obey Him!"

Several things are important to start regulating the body, bringing health to the nervous system and straightening out the blood chemistry:

- Get 8 hours of sleep at night
- Drink a glass or two of water (some like warm—not hot—water) upon rising in the morning
- Eat a good breakfast rich in whole grains, fruits and nuts, etc. Oat porridge is a very easy hot grain to cook and readily available in Ireland. Use some frozen berries, dried fruit, chopped walnuts, ground seed mix, etc. with the porridge to add vital nutrients. Use whole grain bread for toast. Have fresh fruit, bananas, citrus, etc. Taking time for a healthy breakfast is one of the most important things you can do to begin to reset your body clock and straighten out your blood chemistry.
- Remember to drink water, or herb tea, between meals. Try not to use too much sweetener, as this disrupts the blood sugar balance and is hard on the nerves. Caffeine is terrible for the nervous system. The modern science of brain imaging clearly shows how caffeine disrupts the normal circulation and metabolism in the brain. While creating an illusion that we are alert, the fact is that the actual brain function is hindered. The brain, and the rest of the body, needs water to function properly. All the chemical activities that cause us to live take place in a water medium.
- Try not to eat between meals (unless you are diabetic or have other medical reasons that require it) as this keeps the blood sugar constantly bouncing around which adds to the mental confusion and feeling of stress. Especially junk foods and foods high in

sugar and fat should be avoided. If you do need to snack, eat a piece of fruit or a few nuts or whole grain bread. By taking time to eat a good meal you can have enough calories to last until the next meal. Try to keep meals about 5 hours apart, don't go too long between as this upsets the blood sugar levels which greatly impacts our nervous system.

- Make stopping long enough to eat in the middle of the day a priority. It doesn't take that much time and the benefits are huge. Again, try to eat as many unrefined grains, vegetables, fruits and nuts as possible. Animal products will raise the cholesterol levels in our system.
- Remember to drink between meals, we need about 5 or 6 glasses of water in the day, depending on the weather and our activity level.
- Try to get daily aerobic exercise, walking is always good, besides the benefit to the heart exercise is the only thing that promotes the circulation of our lymph system, which is vital for our immune system to work properly.
- Try to get outside in the daylight for at least 15 minutes to a half hour a day, whether or not the sun is shining.
- Plan your day so you can relax in the evening and get a good night's sleep. It's impossible to feel good physically or emotionally without adequate rest. Shut off the telly and computer a while before you retire, the bright light interacts with the cycle of a hormone (melatonin) that causes drowsiness. We need the bright light in the morning to help us wake up and feel alert! Our bodies do best when we go to sleep and rise at regular times; this also helps regulate our circadian rhythms. A couple of hours of sleep before midnight are very beneficial as well.
- Let the negative, catastrophic, thoughts pass right through the mind, don't focus on them or grab them. It's up to us where we place our focus and there are plenty of beautiful, positive things to focus on. As one wise man used to say; 'I know something good!'
- Take a weekly day of rest. This practice is not only good for the health, but relationships within the family as well.
- Remember, there is Someone bigger than you in this universe and He cares for each of us. Take time each day to talk in your heart to your Creator, let Him share your burdens and listen to His counsel—He knows the end from the beginning.