

Stress and looking after yourself

Tips for World Mental Health Day

TECHNIQUES FOR AVOIDING BURNOUT... AND STAYING YOUNG AND RESILIENT!

Many of us are finding the Covid restrictions very hard to bear – especially as autumn turns into winter. We really need to look after ourselves. It's not selfish. If we don't look after ourselves, we will not be much use to other people.

So, I offer a very short introduction to various forms of self-care and stress management. It is a form of pocket guide about breathing, mindfulness and a very simplified form of yoga that can be done at home. It will be pretty basic for some people, but I hope useful.

Rather than this being just a lecture, it is more interesting and motivating to offer you an **instant experience**. So right now, as you read this:

Hold your hand up to your face and breathe onto your palm. As hot as you can make it. Pretend to steam up a mirror. Really open the mouth - and the throat.

Do this for three long slow breaths out. If you start yawning - that's fine, go with it.

How does that feel? Some people say dizzy. Most people say weirdly relaxed.

I think of it as a magical sweet moment. Instant stress reduction.

. For the very busy people among us it may help to remember that things like breathing in a healthier way do not take any more time than breathing in an unhealthy way. That a healthier body posture does not use up time or require special clothing. Even the very simple exercises I offer take five or ten minutes and they are totally not compulsory anyway.

Our social culture is changing

Interestingly, just maybe, the cultural tide is turning now. Change is in the wind... issues like this have suddenly become acceptable, even fashionable. Clever young people (like you?) are doing mindfulness and have stopped boasting about how little they sleep and are now boasting about how much they sleep. And your reading this note maybe is a part of that process? If so - welcome aboard!

Firstly, we can focus on objectively demanding (potentially stressful) situations or events and try to

Let's examine a classic, immediate, acute stress – e.g. a difficult client (or customer or patient – or family member?!)

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The basic point of this note is this: as soon as we become anxious, there are at least **three consequences**:

Two are in the body's reaction which reflects and expresses this:

1. by holding the breath and
2. by tensing the muscles, altering our body language. At the same time –
3. our brain races, seeking solutions.

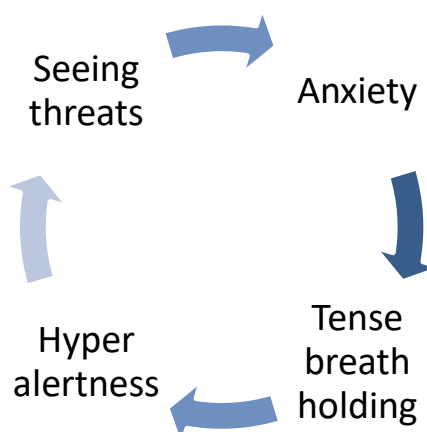
The major point about these body reactions is that it is not just a one-way traffic of the brain sending messages to body. It is a loop: the body sends messages back to the brain.

The body's breath-holding and muscular tension sends really powerful messages back to the brain.

Imagine for an animal it says: "Careful. Danger. Maybe we are under attack – therefore be alert, look for the dangers, the negatives, the threats, assume the worst, exaggerate the problems, look ahead, see them before they get to us." Obviously, this is a perfect recipe for more anxiety. It is experienced as at least a loss of confidence.

Maybe frantic overthinking. Even – dare one admit – fear and dread?

So, we have this very important **vicious circle**:



This is all fine in a crisis, a real immediate threat or need to cope with a problem . The problem lies in the ongoing, long term state of tension which keeps a person in that state of anxiety for longer than they need to be. The logic of the circle is very powerful. Hormonally we are keeping cortisol, the fear hormone, sustained.

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But by the very same logic we have a [magic answer](#): If the logic of the vicious circle is very powerful, this gives us a marvellous opportunity to interrupt that circle and start an equally very powerful 'benign circle'.

If we can achieve less physical stress – ie less bodily tension and breath holding – we can achieve less anxious messages being sent to the brain. That leads to less hyper-alertness and therefore less anxiety which in turn leads to less tense breath holding etc. We can escape the trap.

So the immediate solution to immediate stress is physical – to do with breath and with physical muscular tensing.

Breathing

The solution is not deep breathing. It is open throat breathing. Breathing in the right way is not about driving large amounts of air in and out of the lungs. It is about the state of the muscles of the throat.

This is because the actual holding of the breath is not done by chest or lung muscles; it is done by closing the throat. This may sound surprising, but it is very easy to check. Right now – as you read this. Breathe in. Hold the breath tight for a moment and then release the breath sharply and watch which bit of the body is mainly involved. It is the epiglottis and the vocal chords. You may need to do this several times before it is clear. Make a noise and it is more obvious. The chest moves but the control comes from the throat.

The fact that the vocal chords are involved is fairly clear from the fact that in certain stressful situations we speak with a higher pitched voice (which does not exactly assist in sounding like a relaxed, convincing advocate or an authoritative judge?) or even lose our voice entirely.

Now consider the opposite – the moment when the throat is opened. Laughing, crying openly, howling, shouting in a confident way (strong anger), singing for joy. Saying 'pew'. Sighing. These are all situations of uninhibited emotional expression.

Possible exercises to try – anytime

1. Here we go again - Breathe onto your palm. As hot as you can make it. Pretending to steam up a mirror. That opens the throat very well. Two or three long slow out breaths. Try it again now as you read this? That is a magical sweet moment! Instant stress reduction.
2. Keep breathing very slowly and as silently as possible with the mouth wide open.

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3. Breathe out fully. Then breathe out some more. There is always more to come. Then some more! It is quite surprising that you can – and it can perhaps make us realise how the bottom of the lungs are never fully used. I like to think that I am expelling old stale air that has been there for weeks! Then hold it there – throat open, lungs empty. Peaceful. Strange.
4. Counting the breaths. Or focusing really hard on the throat and the movement of air.
5. One you cannot do at court: Experiment with different sounds as you breathe out – A, E, I, O, U, – the classic ‘Om’. Watch how the throat changes with the different noises.

I find the best are: AAAAH (in) then HAAAAA (out). Try that? You can do them silently.

You may like to Google: ‘Breathing – Autonomic nervous system’ – or look at the fuller version of these notes on the website. Breathing has a major impact on hormonal levels and can very quickly alter our feelings generally and our reaction to objectively stressful situations.

As soon as you do that hot breath on the hand or any of the other exercises, you can feel the cortisol reduce and the pleasant hormones come thorough. And this can be done at any time – it does not take you away from that urgent work that so needs to be done. In fact, you will work far better for doing this.

Belly breathing - v - Chest breathing

This is the other aspect of holding back the breath. The five exercises or techniques mentioned above focus on opening the throat – but one aspect of tension is that stressed breathing becomes shallow and confined to the top of the lungs.

Closed throat goes with chest breathing. What is needed is to open the throat and then also breathe with the belly. Breathe in – extend the stomach. What is happening is that the diaphragm is drawing down. Breathe out – flatten the stomach. The diaphragm is coming up to expel the air from the bottom of the lungs. Again – try it now?

This belly breathing with an open throat sends powerful messages of reassurance to the mind. This is not surprising given the emphasis on breathing techniques in almost every meditation or Yoga tradition. This releases serotonin – the feel-good hormone and oxytocin – which triggers sociability and affection. Subjectively it feels lovely and peaceful.

NOW – Sometimes I do this exercise and feel better. But do I really notice deeply that I feel better? Or do I diminish the importance – and therefore the motivation to repeat this? Do I zip off onto the next activity... not being very in touch with my body? Which leads to...

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Mindfulness

Yes, I know it is uber-fashionable (so possibly mockable) but... to offer some actual scientific explanation:

The racing mind mentioned above refers to [the part of the mind that is highly focused on future planning](#) – (dorsolateral frontal cortex) – and possibly chewing over and regretting the past. Traditional meditation tries to clear the mind, turn down the activity of that centre. It is hard to control that “Wild Horse”. It does not seem directly to feed into a calming effect on the limbic system, the deeper, older emotional centres of the brain where anxiety, anger etc live.

Mindfulness attempts to increase the activity of the medial frontal cortex which is [the part of the brain responsible to keeping tabs on the body](#) – ‘interoception’ (internal perception if you like.) And that seems to be the best way to calm the limbic system. So the essence of mindfulness is focusing on the present, the here and now, most obviously the bodily experience – and that seems to be effective in calming the limbic system and the anxiety. [Strong awareness reduces overthinking and anxiety. If anxiety is about the future, then an intense focus on the present switches off anxiety.](#)

One of the best forms of mindfulness therefore is a close focus on the self, starting with your breathing. Strong awareness displaces the overthinking. Really be aware of the flow of air, how open your throat is, the sound of your breathing, the rise of the belly and chest. Then focus on the rest of the body. How you are sitting, your weight on the seat or the floor. Check through the body carefully.

Other forms of mindfulness recommend you can focus on an object, such as a flower or candle or a piece of fruit. Touch, smell, taste. There is no room here for details of lots of techniques – there are plenty online.

My advice: Keep it simple. Start with breathing. Let it grow out to the next stage... about the body. And then maybe engage the sensory aspect – and the sensual with music, dance, food etc – really relishing the present experience.

Creativity

If one response to stress is to become uptight, frantically calculating and yet curiously detached – the opposite is to be loosened up, spontaneous, immersed – and anyone who lets themselves dance freely, write freely or paint creatively is occupying a very different space. Using a different part of the brain. When was the last time you did that?

Less ambitious perhaps is to engage any [sensory aspect – and the sensual](#) – with listening to music, enjoying food and company etc – really daring to relish the present experience.

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That obviously has its dangers, as it can be simply a frantic, compulsive use of anaesthesia to overlay anxiety and the associated hormones, using distracting, feel-good hormones such as adrenaline, nor-adrenaline, testosterone or other substances. Less obviously that reservation can apply to intense exercise which releases the famous endorphin hit.

A healthier way of doing this may in fact be to reduce the cortisol levels and possibly stimulate different hormones such as oxytocin – which is called the prosocial hormone which promotes closeness with others – and with ourselves. You could say it reduces alienation from others and from ourselves.

And this leads onto the third technique on offer....

Very Simple Practical Yoga 10 minutes standing postures

This is about working with the whole of the body's reaction involved in the stress reaction.

Explore the body language of stress

“Body language” is a well-worn phrase. We may not notice that it says the body is speaking, expressing something from inside. [And for me yoga is not about physical fitness](#) – it is about noticing what the body is trying to say, but often being inhibited –and letting it speak more clearly and go beyond the expression of tension.

Notice how holding back the breath is not the only physical bodily expression of stress, fear and self-control. We may also draw our shoulders up, go generally rigid and tense in the neck, shoulders, spine, especially the lower back.

It is worthwhile listening to this message: acting this out: deliberately act stressed for a few moments. Hold the breath and do all the physical holdings mentioned above. Then tighten it up even more. Then slowly release it. Do this a few times.

Really become aware of what is happening. Become aware that this in fact is a body that we hold for hours at a time. And maybe it is the body that some of us never really come out of?

It can be something you try gradually all day long, but it is also good to try and get a hold of the idea and method with a session for a few minutes breathing and stretching.

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Yoga classes are great for motivation but a short spell of yoga every day at home might be just as good. Or maybe in fact better. Because, rather than following a standard routine set for everyone else in the class, you can do what your body needs – really listening to it and doing as much of each exercise as feels right. So there is a connection here with mindfulness.

Every morning I do the following exercises for just 10 – 15 minutes – or more at weekends:

First I open my mouth wide and feel the challenge to the muscles which normally keep it clamped shut. If you want external authority for this – it is called the lion pose in yoga. Mouth wide open, tongue stuck out. I also move the jaw from side to side and break up the brittle tension that is in the joints.

Then I move on to the neck. Turning my head from side to side, tipping it sideways each way, head back and especially important – the head forward. Hold that position.

Head angle is really important. Dogs display their feelings, their confidence or fear by the position of their tails. Humans do so by the angle of their heads. Bowed down in surrender or sadness, held up tightly in defiance or anxiety. But any instinct we might have to bow the head in the face of stress is overruled by pride. Or the old commend "Chin up!". So the head is often carried in a curious tortoise pose. Half bowed, then cocked up. So we unhealthily repress our emotions. Mixed messages go to the neck muscles and they can go into chronic spasm.

Answer: Bow the head to give that impulse its due. Then later you will be able to raise the head in a clearer, more confident way. Look the world in the eye calmly and assertively. (Bold tangential thought here: Does this have any relationship to worship? An impulse / a need to surrender? Something missing for those of us who are atheists?)

The shoulders express a lot of stress: Try lifting them up even higher round your ears, then dropping them down. Rolling the shoulders and the arms, just like the old PE exercises. Sometimes doing the crawl, swimming stroke. Maybe hear those joints crackle?! Mine do.

Then the back. "You are as young as your spine" The upper spine, twisting, looking behind you. The top of the trunk and then the whole body. The forward bend. Bend the knees to get a good bend. Don't let hamstrings limit that. Hold it there. Collapsed, surrendering, breathing. Feeling peaceful. More of the essence of worship?

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Then the pelvis – maybe a difficult thing to write about because it is sexual. Stress and tension are anti-sex, freezing up. The pelvis is hugely expressive of sexuality. The English are notorious for having ‘frozen pelvises’. So do hula hoop exercises, ‘obscene’ pelvic thrusts and even more embarrassing (for a man?) ‘shaking that ass’ movements.

And all the time breathing. In fact, I find the exercises, particularly the pelvic ones, trigger off breathing – strongly. As if the body at least sees the connection between the two practices.

Do give it a go. And then after only a few minutes, it can lead to stopping and practicing mindfulness – sitting down or still standing.

If the yoga is too much of a hassle – the simplest skilful technique is just open throat breathing: It may be good to think:

“As I breathe in, I am daring to breathe in. I am breathing in courage and confidence and strength. I have the right to be here. When I breathe out, I am daring to relax, to come out of emergency mode. I am safe.”

Confident and relaxed. A nice combination? And you can do this anywhere – at any time.

More material is available further on David’s personal blog: <https://davidjockelson.com>



You may also like to look at the excellent book – [*The Body Keeps the Score* by Van de Kolk](#) for the science behind some of this.

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