

PSYCHOSOMATICS MANUAL

Section N

CORE ENERGTICS AS A TOOL FOR STRESS MANAGEMENT

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Core Energetics Therapist 2003

Stress

Dr. Hans Selye defined stress more than fifty years ago as the "nonspecific response of the body to any demands made upon it." He said that eustress was a form of stress which serves to stimulate emotional or physical growth. Examples of eustress might be the birth of a child that stimulates emotional growth in the parents, or weight-bearing exercise that stimulates bone strengthening. Distress on the other hand, is stress that results in negative responses, which interfere with normal physiological or psychological functioning. A stressor is any event or condition, which stimulates the stress response. Below is a list of the types of stressors and examples for each type.

Physical---lack of sleep, smoking, sedentary lifestyle
Social---embarrassment, rejection, arguments
Intellectual---overload, mentally stagnant, mental fatigue
Emotional---unexpressed anger, inability to form fulfilling relationships
Spiritual---moral conflict, guilt, lack of purpose
Environmental---noise, poverty, temperature

Stress Response

The stress response is a physiologic reaction to the individual's perception of danger. The perception of danger may or may not be conscious. In either case, the *fight or flight response* occurs. A series of biochemical changes occur in the body that prepare the individual to fight or flee the threat or danger. An alarm is sent from the cerebral cortex to the hypothalamus, which stimulates the Sympathetic Nervous System. Adrenaline is secreted into the bloodstream setting off a series of reactions that allow for quick bursts of energy. The heart rate, respiratory rate, blood pressure, metabolism, and muscle tension all increase. There is shunting of blood from the gut and the periphery (hands, feet, skin) to the large skeletal muscles, and the vital organs (heart, lungs, and brain). The pupils dilate, allowing for sharper vision. The hearing becomes more acute. This occurs in stages. Stage one is responsible for the mobilization of energy as described above.

Stage two is exhaustion or consuming of energy. If there is no escape from Stage one, the body will begin to release stored sources of energy, using up its resources. This may lead to feeling driven, pressured, tired, fatigued. It may result in increase of toxic coping mechanisms such as, smoking, use of caffeine and alcohol.

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Stage three is draining of energy stores. If the stressful situation is not resolved, the individual may become chronically stressed as the body's needs for energy sources exceeds its ability to produce them. This may lead to serious illnesses such as: heart disease, ulcers, insomnia, errors in judgment, and mental illness.

Importance of the Stress Response for Survival

This stress response happens within seconds of the perceived threat. It is a response that would allow you to get out of the way of a speeding car. It would help you run from an animal about to attack. It might give what seems like "superhuman" strength to lift a heavy object that had fallen on someone. It is this response that makes you fully alert if you are awakened by the sound of an intruder in the middle of the night. Though situations like these are rare, they are part of the human experience. The stress response is a survival mechanism.

Effects of Chronic Stress

The stress response is a dramatic series of reactions that affect the body, mind, and emotions of the individual. The adrenaline rush causes bursts of energy. When the energy is depleted over a period of time, the individual may suffer from irritability, headaches, inability to concentrate, poor memory, all of which decrease mental acuity. He may experience flushed face, cold hands and feet, palpitations, high blood pressure, shortness of breath, acid stomach, gas, muscle tension, or spasms, interfering with normal physical functioning. Emotional effects include: feeling conflicted, mood swings, insomnia, disorganization, hyper-reactivity.

Over time these may lead to ulcers, coronary disease, chronic hypertension, decreased immune system functioning, depression, mild paranoia, inability to make decisions, forgetfulness, overindulgence in alcohol, drugs, food, and inability to function optimally.

It is these long term effects as well as the discomfort associated with the stress response, that make it important for people to learn methods to help them manage stress.

Methods for Managing Stress

There are many and varied methods for managing stress. Each individual differs in which ones work best for them depending on their style and personality. I like to offer clients as many methods as I can, so they will have a "box of tools" from which to choose. I begin by asking them what is working for them already. I point out that in order to survive they must have developed methods for managing stress. This starts the ball rolling on a positive note, which is in itself actually a good tool for managing stress. Looking at what works, counting your strengths and successes can increase the flow of the parasympathetic hormones that operate during states of relaxation. I organize the methods of managing stress that I teach clients, on five levels of being: physical, emotional, mental, the will, and spiritual.

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I. Physical

Conscious breathing is the easiest, most portable way to manage stress. Simply bringing attention to the breath has a tendency to slow it down and deepen it, creating an immediate relaxation response. There are many breathing techniques that can create the relaxation response. The more they are practiced, the more quickly the response can be induced.

Deep Breathing can be done anywhere, anytime. Simply fill the lungs so that the abdomen expands outward. The mind now focused on filling the belly is freed from stressful thoughts. Placing the hand on the abdomen and feeling it rise with the in breath can assure that the breathing is deep enough.

Another breathing techniques that also engages the mind is to count while breathing. Breathe in to a count and four and breathe out to a count of four. Experiment with making the exhalation longer than the inhalation. Breathe in to a count of four and breathe out to a count of eight.

Progressive muscle relaxation is a physical technique that also tends to quiet the mind while relaxing the body. Simply bringing awareness to parts of the body can cause them to relax in a passive way. Active progressive relaxation involves tensing and then relaxing a muscle group and noticing the difference. Either way, begin at the feet and work your way up, including all the major muscle groups. Alternatively, start at the head and work your way down. To create relaxation in the forehead, first raise the eyebrows as high as possible and then relax. Scrunch your face tightly and let it go. Make a tight fist and let it go to relax the hand and forearm. Press the upper arm against the sides of the chest or press the elbows on the arms of chair, to create relaxation of the upper arms. Take a deep breath, hold it, pull the shoulder blades together and release to allow the chest and shoulders to relax. Breathe in and bear down as if about to have a bowel movement, exhale and relax the abdomen. (This should NOT be done by cardiac patients.) Tense the legs by straightening them and pressing the toes toward the nose and release to cause relaxation in the leg muscles. Progressive relaxation can be done is just few minutes and the benefits can last for hours.

Eating a balanced diet that has little or no caffeine, sugar and alcohol helps support the body's immune system and its ability to recover from stressful events. While alcohol may seem to relax you at first, it is a depressant and interferes with your overall sense of wellbeing. Getting enough restful sleep is important too.

Grounding exercises are a wonderful way to bring energy into the legs and relax the entire body. Grounding in this sense refers techniques to help fully feel yourself in the present moment. Begin in a standing position with feet hip distance apart. Balance your weight across the entire foot. Begin to slowly bend and straighten the legs at the knees, while pressing the heels into the floor. Pressing the heels fully engages all the muscles of the legs. Open the mouth to allow the breath to expand. Sigh as you exhale, the

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movement of sound also breaks muscle tension.

For people who are somehow physically compromised, visually focusing on the flame of a candle creates the same effect of bringing yourself into the present moment. The aforementioned breathing exercises have this effect as well.

Regular physical exercise has an immediate benefit in terms of the stress response. The stress hormones prepare the body for action. It follows that physical activity helps offset the adverse effects of the stress response. Endorphins, the body natural painkillers are released during bouts of exercise. They stimulate positive immune system response. While any exercise can have these positive effects, Yoga practice is directly aimed at using the body to create relaxation and body awareness.

II. Emotional

From my own experience and from much of what I've read, Self-Love and Self-Acceptance and Self-forgiveness are critical in managing stress. This may not be an easy task for some. Perfectionism runs very strongly in our culture. I suggest using these affirmations: "I love and accept myself exactly as I am." I am human and entitled to make mistakes." And when a mistake is made, "I lovingly forgive myself."

Acceptance of "what is" creates inner peace. Look at a situation from the angle of changing what is within your control and letting go of what is not.

Acknowledge your feelings. Even if you cannot allow them to flow in a given situation, acknowledge them for later processing. For example, you may choose not to express anger at your boss or a customer. However, the emotion is there. Acknowledge it. Later when the situation allows, you may find a way to express this without causing harmful consequences to yourself or anyone else. You may want to go for a walk and "pound the pavement" to release the energy of that anger.

Cry when you need to cry. Find someone with whom you feel safe and let yourself cry.

Laughter and humor can improve your mood, giving you a different lighter perspective of any situation. Laughter raises the heart rate and blood pressure, and tenses muscles temporarily. After a good laugh the heart rate and blood pressure go down and the muscles feel less tense.

III. Mental

Listen to your own self-talk. Discover the things you half-consciously repeat to yourself each day. Weed out the negatives. Replace them with affirmation. Affirmation is a method of stating what you want to create in the form of a positive "I" statement in the present tense. For example, you

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discover that you frequently say to yourself, "I'm always late." Replace this negative statement with "I find it easy to organize myself and be prompt." Whatever we tell ourselves reinforces it in us. We can choose to tell ourselves positive things.

Meditation is a mental technique that has many benefits. You can learn meditation from books, commercially produced tapes and CDs. You can go to meditation classes. Meditation is usually part of Yoga classes. The simplest way that I find to meditate is to close my eyes and imagine I can find my center. I allow my thoughts to quiet down as I breathe slowly into my center. I allow my shoulders to drop and feel my sits bones in my seat. I imagine that I am creating an inner stillness that cannot be disturbed, even in the midst of outer activity. This has a powerful relaxing effect.

Time management reduces unnecessary creation of stressors. Make lists of what needs to be accomplished. Prioritize the list. Plan a period of time for yourself to just relax or do something pleasurable each day. Focus your efforts on one or two things on your list and cross them off when you complete the task. This creates a sense of accomplishment, which can be motivating. Make goals and time frames realistic. If they are unrealistic, this can create frustration and add stressors.

Visualize yourself completing your list. Avoid procrastination as much as possible, but forgive yourself and move on if you slip up. Delegate responsibilities when you can. Very often, unnecessary stressors are created, by taking on jobs that don't truly belong to you. Ask for help when you need it and accept it when it's offered.

Make good decisions. Making lists can be helpful here too. When making an important decision, list the advantages and disadvantages for each of your choices. If you're still not sure, sleep on it. Ask your subconscious mind to help you. One of the functions of sleep is psychological integration. Sometimes the old adage is all that's needed.

IV. The Will

Examine your life from the perspective of your will. Notice how often stressors are created because you simply want "your way." Notice how much of the stressors in your life are there because of the choices you make. Make a list of the ones you can choose to eliminate. Notice how willing you are to allow things to happen or if you feel you must control them. Controlling behavior can be unconscious and habitual. Examining your life in this way can bring to consciousness places where you can lighten up and let go.

V. Spiritual

Find meaning in your life. Ask yourself, "What is the lesson here for me?" Look back at stressful situations that you've come through. Very often, you can find positive changes and personal growth that resulted. Develop your spirituality. Examine your beliefs based on what works for you. Discover your life purpose. You might begin by looking at the gifts and talents you possess. Examine how you share them with the world, or at least in your own world. Make gratitude a habit. When you are in the most

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stressful situation, see if you can find something for which you are grateful.

Conclusion

I find it useful to use these five levels to teach stress management because it includes something for everyone. Choosing one or two of these methods can make a difference for most people.

Bibliography

Anspaugh, David J., and Michael H. Hamrick, and Frank D. Rosato. *Wellness, Concepts and Applications*. Missouri: Mosby. 1991.

This book was a text for a Health and Wellness course I took at Camden County College. The chapter "coping with and managing stress," provided information that was clear and simple. Information on General Adaptation syndrome was outlined. The chapter concluded with a personal action plan/worksheet that could be used as a model for individualized stress management treatment plans.

Brennan, Barbara Ann. *Hands of Light, A Guide to Healing Through the Human Energy Field*. New York: Bantam Books. 1987.

This book, written for healers, provided information on grounding exercises and on various healing meditations.

Boyne, Gil, Editor. *Hypnosis: New Tool in Nursing Practice*. California: Westwood Publishing Company. 1982.

This compilation of articles gave various uses for hypnosis in nursing practice. Its usefulness to me in stress management was its inclusion of various relaxation techniques that were identified for use with hospital patients, persons in pain, women in labor.

Cashman, Kevin. *Leadership From the Inside Out, Becoming a Leader for Life*. Utah: Executive Excellence Publishing. 1998.

Two chapters in this book were particularly useful in developing my stress management program. First, the chapter, "Purpose Mastery," gave specific reflections on discovering your purpose in life. (This is one of the methods I use on the spiritual level of stress management.) Second, the chapter, "Being Mastery," provided information and exercises to develop a sense of inner peace that supports more effectiveness. There is also a chapter on balance. This book is also very useful in developing corporate programs on stress management.

Davis, Martha, and Elizabeth Robbins Eshelman, and Matthew McKay. *The Relaxation & Stress Reduction Workbook*. California: New Harbinger Publications. 1995.

This excellent resource book proved extremely useful in developing stress management workshops. Besides defining stress and stress reactions,

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It gave at least nineteen techniques for managing stress. The authors used clear, concise language that made understanding these techniques easy. It also included a chapter on job stress which was useful in tailoring workshops in employee departments.

Hay, Louise. *You Can Heal Your Life*. California: Hay House, Inc. 1999.

This popular self-help book provides useful information about the cognitive problem of negative self-talk. It instructs clearly on how to develop positive affirmations.

Lowen, Alexander. *Bioenergetics*. New York: Penguin Books. 1975.

Lowen discusses anxiety, breathing, breathing and grounding exercises.