

GETTING
UN-STRESSED
from the
INSIDE OUT

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GETTING UNSTRESSED *from the INSIDE OUT*

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CARIBOOLINKS PUBLISHING
Saturna Island BC Canada

**This book is dedicated to
my sons, Luc and Adam,
with love and appreciation.**

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QUESTIONNAIRE

Answer yes or no to the following questions:

1. Do you feel someone else or something outside you is causing most of your stress? (Y/N)
2. Do you feel as if you are in charge of your life? (Y/N)
3. Do you have a good sense of direction in your life? (Y/N)
4. Do you ever blame the past for your present problems? (Y/N)
5. Do the things you HAVE to do interfere with doing what you WANT to do? (Y/N)
6. Do you spend most of your time doing the things that are the most important priorities in your life? (Y/N)
7. Do you speak to and about others with respect even when they are not present? (Y/N)
8. Do you hate to admit when you make a mistake? (Y/N)
9. In a disagreement, do you listen well and try to understand the other point of view? (Y/N)
10. Would you rather not work with people who are different from you? (Y/N)
11. Do you exercise regularly to stay fit and healthy? (Y/N)
12. Are you frequently bored? (Y/N)
13. Do you answer questions like these with ruthless self-honesty? (Y/N)
14. Do your relationships suffer from lack of attention? (Y/N)
15. Is inner peace one of your priorities? (Y/N)

Score 1 point for yes answers to: 2, 3, 6, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15... _____

Subtract 1 point for yes answers to: 1, 4, 5, 8, 10, 12, 14... _____

Total: _____

(An honest score of 6-8 indicates a potential for real success!)

INTRODUCTION

I've been teaching stress management and relaxation to people of all ages for more than forty years and I've come to a clearer and clearer understanding of what stress, and getting "unstressed", is all about.

When my son was only about ten years old, he came home from school one day and announced that they'd had a surprise music test. "How was it?" I asked. "Well," he said, "the teacher took each kid out to the hall one at a time to play the recorder. I was getting really nervous waiting for my turn until I noticed myself and remembered about breathing, So I said to myself - 'In through the nose and out through the mouth' - a few times, and then," he said proudly, "I was fine." (Inside, I was saying "YES!")

“In through the nose and out through the mouth” became his little catch phrase to remind himself, and me at times, to stay calm. What I loved about that incident was that my son had learned two important things about stress: one, that attention to the breath could help him calm down, and more importantly, that there was something he could do about his stress.

Stress is defined by the experts as our response to change... it's good to remember that stress is actually our response, and not the external situation that triggers it. I once met a motivational speaker who inspired audiences all around the world with his story of triumph over adversity. In two separate accidents Mitchell was burned over most of his body and then paralyzed from the waist down. He overcame incredible pain and loss to rise to a new level of success and joy in his life. The theme of his talk was that “it's not what happens to you, it's what you do about it.”

I met another man named Jerry Coffee who was a POW in Viet Nam for several years. He wrote a book about that traumatic experience called, “Beyond Survival”. It is an amazing testimony to the strength of the human spirit and the power of faith. Jerry writes: “When we cannot change a situation, resolution comes through the way we choose to handle it within ourselves. To let go is not to deny but to accept. Letting go moves us beyond the unproductive lament of ‘What if?’ and ‘Why me, Lord?’ to the constructive acceptance of ‘What is’ and ‘Show me, Lord’”.

Jerry and Mitchell are inspiring examples of the fact that no matter what the circumstances, there is a way to respond creatively and joyfully, to live the wisdom of the Serenity Prayer:

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

The Serenity Prayer is used every day by millions of people in Twelve Step Programs, including Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Narcotics Anonymous, AlAnon, Adult Children of Alcoholics, Overeaters Anonymous, Emotions Anonymous, and many other such support groups. I've heard it said that there are more people involved in Twelve Steps programs today than in any other spiritual or religious organization in the western world!

As an addictions counselor for many years, I learned that substance abuse, and other addictive behaviors, are habits developed initially as an attempt to deal with stress. They are short term solutions with long term disadvantages... often disastrous ones.

Most of us have knee-jerk reactions to some situations in life, reactions that do not work for us any more. Changing old habits is never easy. We are designed to maintain the status quo. Behaviours that are repeated often enough become automatic and self-perpetuating. We humans are creatures of habit.

Fortunately, we have another quality that helps us to change.

Years ago, my son came home from grade school one day very excited about something he had learned. "Did you know," he asked, "that flies are born knowing everything they're ever going to know?" I was appropriately amazed. That's why, we decided, they bang into the window over and over again. They have no way of learning anything new, or of coming up with new strategies.

We humans, on the other hand, can make mistakes and learn from them. We can, unlike flies, realize when something is not working and think of another solution. Instead of beating ourselves up when we realize we've made a mistake, we should pat ourselves on the back and congratulate ourselves for being so evolved!

This ability we have to try new things and to think of other possibilities is creativity. Creative thinking is the antidote to addiction. I came across a little book some years ago, now out of print, called *The Man Who Tapped the Secrets of the Universe*. It is a true story of a man named Walter Russell, an American who had incredible success in everything he tried, from art to architecture to figure skating. With no formal education past elementary school, he excelled at everything he set out to do.

According to author Glenn Clark, Russell found success by this creed: "With love of your work, love of life, and reverence for the universal force which gives you unlimited power for the asking, you may sit on top of the world if you desire to sit there."

Walter Russell believed that mediocrity was “self-inflicted” and that genius was “self-bestowed”. He asserted that “an inner joyousness, amounting to ecstasy, is the normal condition of the genius mind.” Unfortunately, the search for happiness takes many of us off track in the direction of euphoria, a transitory and unfulfilling kind of false happiness, or into numbness, which is an attempt to avoid or escape the feelings we don’t think we can handle.

Working with addictions has taught me some powerful lessons about stress. I’ve learned that what we think we can’t handle has great power to hurt us. Henry Ford was quoted as saying, “If you think you can or you think you can’t, you’re right!”

Whatever we feel helpless to face, whatever we’re unwilling to experience, puts us at risk. Even after a seven-year ordeal as a POW, Jerry Coffee says “This moment, whatever it brings, is the gift. Our celebrations of today create the laugh lines on the face of tomorrow.”

One key to success, it would seem, and to handling stress creatively, is faith, believing first of all in ourselves. “The only real security we have,” says Jerry Coffee, “is the certainty that we’re equipped to handle whatever happens to us.”

A program was developed in the United States some years ago to help school children learn to handle stress. There are five simple but effective steps, beginning with two statements: “I need to relax” (self-awareness) and “I can relax now” (self-confidence). These are the inner-directed keys to changing the effects of stress in your life. Stress is an inside job and getting unstressed needs to happen from the inside out.

In his 1985 best-seller, *The Joy of Stress*, Dr. Peter Hanson tells of an experiment that was conducted where two groups of people were exposed to noise while they worked. One group was given a button on their desk, which, if they wanted to use it, would quiet the noise. The other group had no such control button. The first group ended up having much higher productivity levels than the second group, even though no one actually ever used the button.

Working with substance abusers helped me learn that our habitual (and addictive) reactions to life's challenges are extensions of our personal and habitual ways of seeing and making meaning of events. Our past experiences produce the assumptions and expectations which colour our perceptions of everything that happens.

*We don't see things as they are;
we see them as we are.*

The Talmud

An interesting experiment was done at a conference for teachers where several slides of different playing cards were shown, one after the other in fairly quick succession. Then the teachers were asked to mark which ones they remembered seeing. Not one person remembered all the cards. One card that was shown, amongst the others, was a black queen of hearts. No one saw it. What we know of playing cards does not include a black queen of hearts. It does not fit with what we expect to see... so it doesn't even register in our conscious mind.

We all know how easy it is to miss typos in a page we've just read or even written. Our mind has the capacity to add letters that it expects to see and delete those which don't belong. Our mind does this also in other areas of our life. We can easily, for example, get into the habit of tuning out sounds we don't want to hear, such as traffic, or nagging.

In addition to our habits of perception (and omission) most of us have certain habits of presence (or absence), of dwelling in the past or jumping ahead to the future. There is a well-known story of two monks on a pilgrimage. They came to a river where a young woman was having difficulty getting across. One monk picked her up, carried her across, and set her down on the other side. The monks continued on their journey for several hours without speaking. Finally the other monk spoke. "How could you break your vows like that and touch that woman... carry her in your arms?" he asked outraged. The first monk replied, "You're still carrying her? I put her down hours ago."

Try a little exercise to discover your own habits. For two minutes, just let your mind think whatever it thinks, wander wherever it wants to go. At the end of two minutes, notice whether your mind tended mostly to think back to the past (memory) or think ahead to the future (fantasy), or to focus on present experiences.

If you do this a few times, you'll probably notice tendencies for past or future thinking. Most of our stress resides there, rather than here in the moment. Simply shifting our focus of attention to the present moment can lower our stress level considerably and help us to relax.

Along with habits of seeing and not seeing (or hearing and not hearing), and habits of thinking in the past or future, we also usually have habits of reacting to stress by either engaging or disengaging. There are two main ways of engaging: fighting and pleasing. There are two main ways of disengaging: rejecting, and withdrawing.

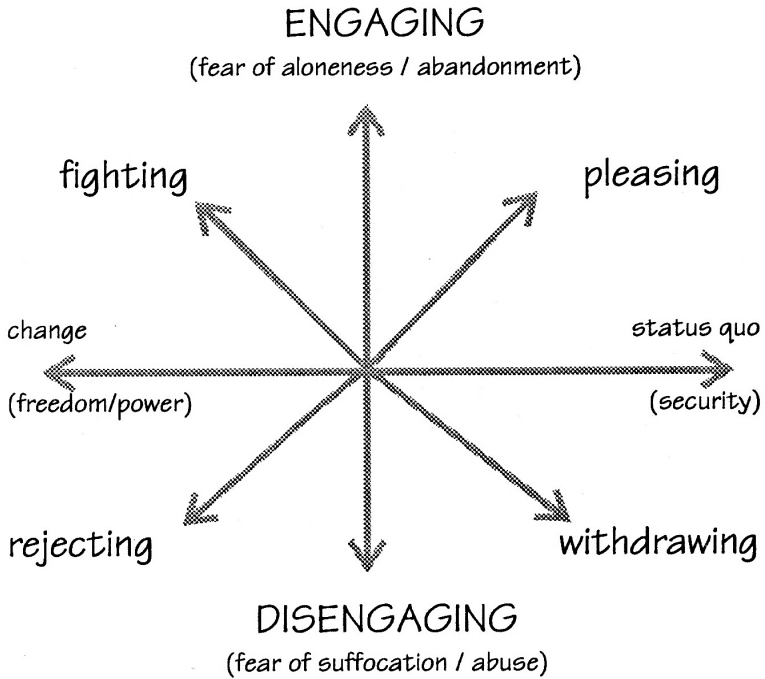
Fighting and rejecting both tend to push for change. Pleasing and withdrawing both tend to maintain the status quo. Fighting might be assertive or aggressive. It can be competitive or combative, brave or downright obnoxious.

Pleasing might be cooperative and supportive or non-assertive and submissive.

The stress (distress) of fighting is the result of feeling the pressure to win, or the fear of failure, and, of course, fatigue.

The stress (distress) of pleasing is a result of one's own needs not being met, anxiety about what others think, and, of course, resentment.

COPING STYLES



Rejecting can be decisive and creative, or judgemental and reactive. The stress is a result of constantly focusing on what's wrong. This separates us from others through blaming.

Withdrawing also separates, though in a more impersonal and uncommunicative way than rejecting. This tends to make us independent, even solitary. Often withdrawers are loners, and suffer from the stress of loneliness and lack of support.

Typically, fighters and rejecters are concerned with issues of freedom and personal choice or power. Pleasers and withdrawers, on the other hand, tend to be more concerned with security issues, and dislike change.

In *Born to Rebel*, researcher Frank Sulloway makes a case for the tendency of first-borns to be more conservative (pleasers and withdrawers?) and for later-borns to be more rebellious (fighters or rejecters). Whether this fits for you or not, can you identify your own particular style of handling stressful situations? Can you see how your style works for you?

How does your personal style create its own problems?

Not all habits need to be changed. Stephen Covey's best-seller, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, outlines the ways that very successful people from all walks of life behave in various life situations. According to Stephen Covey, the most successful people he met all made "inner peace" a priority in their lives.

Did you answer yes to question 15 in our questionnaire? If so, how much time each day do you devote directly to this priority?

Learning to handle stress from the inside out is a must on the way to inner peace. Dan Goleman's best-selling book, *Emotional Intelligence*, presents overwhelming evidence that a better indicator of a person's success in life than their IQ is their level of emotional intelligence. One important characteristic identified by Goleman in this regard is the ability to calm down.

I heard a story once about two world champion martial artists who met for a competition to determine who was the best. They squared off on the mat and for several minutes, neither of them made a move. Suddenly, one of them turned and walked off the mat. "What happened?" everyone cried. "I lost," he replied. "What do you mean?" they said. "He never even touched you!" "I started to get angry," he explained. In that moment of losing control of his emotions, of losing his cool, by his own standards he had lost.

Habits are not easy to change, and years of habitual reactions to life's challenges will take time to give way to new creative responses. But changes begin to happen with the first two simple steps learned by schoolchildren:

1. Notice when you need to calm down. Say, "I need to relax."
2. Realize that you can calm down... you have a choice, no matter what the circumstances. Say to yourself, "I can relax now."

In *A Man's Search for Meaning*, his inspiring autobiographical account of surviving the Nazi concentration camps, Viktor Frankl wrote, "No one can take away man's ultimate freedom: that is the freedom to choose one's own attitude in any given situation." This is the ultimate in handling stress from the inside out.

Now let's explore some simple effective strategies for getting "unstressed", starting with that Five-Step plan.

EXERCISES

1. FIVE STEPS TO CALM DOWN

1. Tell yourself: I need to relax.
2. Tell yourself: I can relax now.
3. Imagine the breath coming in your feet and up your body to your head on the inhalation.
4. At the "top" of the inhalation, relax your jaw.
5. Imagine the breath going out down the length of your body to the ground on the exhalation.

Repeat two or three times and notice yourself calming down as you do. Letting the exhalation out with an audible sigh makes it work even better.

Remember: "In through the nose, out through the mouth..."

2. BREATHING

Sit tall in a chair, feet flat, eyes closed.

Adjust your weight so it rests evenly on your sitting bones.

Rest your hands and arms.

Notice the space between your lower ribs and your hips...
between your chest and your ribs...
between your ears and your shoulders...
between the top of your head and your sitting bones...

Begin to notice your breath without doing anything to control or change it. Imagine the breath moving effortlessly into those spaces, expanding and softening your body from the inside out.

Imagine and feel yourself sitting tall and graceful, breathing effortlessly.

Let your body gently blend into that image... that feeling of softness,
openness,
space.

Feel yourself being gently breathed by the breath.

Enjoy the feeling.

3. GROUNDING

Sit tall in a chair with your feet flat and eyes closed. Notice the weight of your body resting on the seat of the chair. Let your hands rest quietly in your lap. Turn your attention to your breathing, just noticing it moving into and out of your body effortlessly.

Imagine that your breath moves up and down the length of your spine, and that your exhalation extends down from your tailbone into the ground, like a grounding cord. Imagine it extending further and further down into the ground with each breath.

At the end of each breath out, feel the weight of your body on the chair, and the ground under your feet. Pause just for a moment before receiving the next inhalation to feel how your body is supported by the chair and the ground.

Enjoy the sense of becoming more “grounded”. Notice how it feels. This exercise is particularly useful when you feel off balance, upset, or spacey. It can be very helpful to offset the stress of air travel or general anxiety.

Another way to create a feeling of being grounded is described on page 32 (The Squat).

4. SITTING BACK TO BACK

Ideally this is done sitting back to back with a partner. You can also do it with your back against a wall or against the back of a chair.

Arrange yourself comfortably and let as much of your back as possible make contact with your partner's back (or the wall, etc.).

For a moment, just notice that you can feel your own breath. Become aware of the movement of breath into and out of your body.

You may begin to notice that you can feel the movement of breath in your back. Focus on this sensation for several breaths. There's nothing else you need to do.

If you are sitting with a partner, you may begin to notice her breath moving in her back. You'll feel it with your back. Keep breathing into your own back and notice, too, the rhythm of your partner's breath.

After awhile, gently move a little away from your partner (or the wall, or the back of the chair). Keep noticing your breath and your back and whatever sensations you have there.

If possible, complete this exercise by lying down on the floor on your back with your knees bent, feet flat, arms relaxed by your sides. Just notice the shape your back makes on the floor and how this shape changes as you inhale and exhale.

Then just rest.

5. SHOULDER SHRUG

Sit or stand tall, letting your spine seem to lengthen. If you're standing, relax your knees and place your weight evenly over both feet. If you're sitting, bring your weight directly and evenly onto your sitting bones.

Imagine that the top of your head is suspended from above by an invisible cord and feel the whole spine lengthening effortlessly.

With your arms hanging loosely by your sides, close your eyes and just begin to notice your breathing. As you inhale, shrug your shoulders up close to your ears. Exhale slowly and release your shoulders as you release the breath. Repeat this shoulder shrugging three or four times.

Now just sit quietly for a moment, and experience fully any changing sensations in your body, especially in your neck, shoulders, and upper back.

Generally, wherever you become aware of unnecessary tension in your body, you can trigger a relaxation response by gently tightening the muscles a little more and letting go with an exhalation.

6. WARM HANDS

Sit comfortably with your hands resting in your lap.

Let your arms and hands feel limp and heavy.

Soften your gaze or close your eyes and bring your hands into your awareness.

Begin to focus on your breathing. Feel your breath moving effortlessly into and out of your body.

Imagine your breath expanding in the center of your chest as you inhale.

As you exhale, imagine your breath flowing in a warm stream down your arms and into your hands.

Continue breathing into your chest and exhaling a warm current of energy down into your hands.

Your hands may begin to feel if they are glowing, tingling, golden... warmer and warmer

Enjoy whatever sensations you are experiencing. In addition to bringing soothing energy to your hands, warming your hands this way may be especially effective as a natural headache remedy.

7. BELLY BREATH

Lie down comfortably on your back with your knees bent, feet flat, hip-width apart.

Relax your legs by allowing your knees to rest against each other. This helps to relieve tension in the lower back.

Let your whole back, as much as possible, rest evenly on the floor.

Rest your palms lightly on your belly, near your navel, and begin to notice the movement of breath into your belly.

Don't force the movement or the breath. You'll feel it more and more as you relax.

Let the touch of your fingers invite a softening of any tightness in your abdomen, feeling the breath sinking deeper and deeper into that space.

Feel your belly and your hands rise and sink down gently with each breath.

As your breathing deepens more and more this way you'll feel a general sense of relaxation spreading throughout your whole body.

Enjoy.

8. RIBCAGE BREATH

Sit or lie down comfortably. With your hands resting on the sides of your ribcage, spread your fingers along your ribs.

Become aware of the movement of your ribcage as you breathe in and out.

On the exhalations, begin to gently press the ribs inward just a little. Relax the pressure so that you can feel the breath coming in pushing the ribcage out.

Let the movement of the hands invite a natural easy movement in the ribs.

After a few breaths, hold your hands forward, in front of your body, palms facing each other, with your elbows against your sides.

Exhale completely and as you inhale, move your hands apart without moving your elbows away from the sides of your body. As you exhale, move your palms toward each other.

Continue this arm movement in the natural rhythm of your breath a few more times, noticing the expansion of your ribcage as you inhale. Then just let your arms relax.

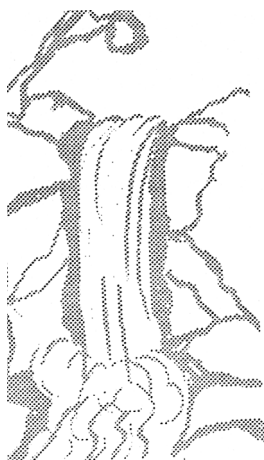
Bringing our attention to feeling how the ribcage can naturally move with the breath, will improve the way our breathing can both energize and relax us.

9. WATERFALL

Sitting tall, place your feet evenly on the floor. Imagine sending your grounding cord down into the earth from your tailbone. Close your eyes and begin to notice any areas of tension or discomfort in your body.

Imagine now that you are sitting in a beautiful tropical setting under a soft and soothing waterfall, the water streaming down over your body gently from head to toe, cleansing and clearing away all the tension, fatigue, discomfort, and any unpleasant feelings you may have... leaving you feeling clean and clear and refreshed in body and mind.

This experience can be both visual and kinesthetic, felt in the body as deliciously relaxing, and seen in the mind's eye as a lovely image. Through opening all our senses, even in imagining, our experience of every moment will be enhanced.



10. TREE

Stand tall with your feet slightly apart your arms hanging by your sides. Let outside distractions begin to melt away in your increasing awareness of your breath. Imagine your breath coming in from the ground up and then breathe down the length of your body and out your feet.

Begin to imagine and visualize a tree. Notice what kind of tree comes to mind. Imagine that you are like that tree and that the breath out sends roots down into the ground, reaching deep into the earth. Feel your connection with the earth through the soles of your feet.

Feel your spine and trunk stretching up like the trunk of the tree, stretching up to the sun without losing that rooted connection with the ground.

With each breath, feel the tensions of your body begin to fall away, just as the old dead bark and leaves fall away from the tree. Feel the energy of the earth and of the sun flowing through you. Become, like the tree, vibrantly alive, at ease in your natural perfection.

11. INHALE – TIGHTEN, EXHALE – RELEASE

This is wonderful to do in bed to help you release tension and restlessness and fall asleep more easily. Lie comfortably, taking a moment just to notice the breath. Begin to allow the exhalations to lengthen into gentle sighs.

GETTING UNSTRESSED from the INSIDE OUT

Focus your attention on your feet and, as you inhale, slowly tighten the muscles of the feet. Exhaling, release the tension, letting go of the breath and the tightness at the same time.

Gradually move your attention up through the body, one part after another, gently tightening as you inhale and releasing the tightness as you release the breath. Move this way through

the legs...

the pelvis...

the chest...

the belly...

the shoulders...

the arms...

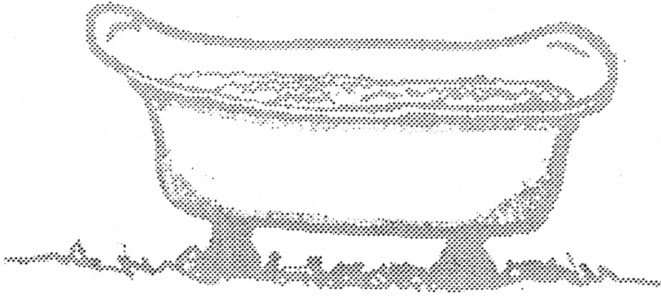
the neck...

and finally the face.

With each breath out, feel your body relaxing more and more. As your body comes to rest, continue to sense each exhalation as a softening release.

12. SIGHING

This can be done in any comfortable position. Close your eyes and imagine the feeling of sinking into a nice hot bath. Let out a great sigh as you feel your body melting into the soothing warm water.



Repeat the sighing, first as a long slow exhalation, gradually letting it be more audible, like a groan or hum. Begin to play with the sound of it, feeling the vibrations in different parts of your body. Feel your face and jaw relaxing with the mouth open to release the sighs more easily. Let each sigh vibrate more and more deeply in the body,

Experiment with humming and notice how your exhalations lengthen effortlessly if you breathe out with a soft humming sound. Feel what tone resonates most comfortably and invites the body to relax. Does it feel better to breathe out with the mouth open or closed?

Mmmmmmm

aaaaaaahh

13. RAG DOLL

Stand with your feet parallel, a little apart. Relax your knees. With each breath coming in, imagine the spine lengthening, the spaces between each vertebra expanding. With each breath out, feel a release of tension, a general softening throughout your body.

On an exhalation, let your upper body hang forward loosely, without straining, arms and hands and head hanging down. Let your knees stay slightly bent to allow your back to release even more.

Hang as loosely as a rag doll, breathing into any tightness that you feel and softening with each breath out. Stay for two or three breaths if you are comfortable. If this is hard for your back, rest your hands on the seat of a chair to take some of the weight of your upper body onto your arms.

To come up, keep your knees bent and round your back lifting one vertebra at a time, inhaling as you curl up slowly. Let your arms and hands hang loosely as you come up, shoulders relaxed, and bring your head up last.

When you're standing upright, exhale down the length of your body to the ground.

Take a moment to notice sensations, thoughts, images, or whatever else is happening. Your standing posture may feel different after this movement. Notice what changes you feel.

14. ROCKING ELBOWS

This adaptation of a Feldenkrais movement is a wonderful way to release shoulder tension.

Lie comfortably on your back with your knees bent, feet flat, arms by your sides. Take a moment to just become aware of how your shoulders feel resting on the ground.

Reach up with your arms and take each elbow with the other hand. Holding your elbows above your chest, begin a slow rocking movement of the elbows side to side, letting the elbow come as close to the floor as it can easily.

Notice the feeling across the upper back and shoulders as your elbows rock from side to side. Does your head want to turn with the elbow movement? Let your head roll naturally and gently. Then leave the head still while only your arms move in an easy rhythm.

Slow down the rocking movement until your arms come back to the starting place, elbows held above your chest. Bringing your attention to your shoulders, lift your elbows upward as you inhale and rest the shoulders back down as you exhale. Repeat for three or more breaths, feeling the shoulders lift and then find the support of the ground again.

Finally, release your elbows and gently rest your arms by your sides. Notice any change in how your shoulders feel resting on the ground.

15. SQUAT

This exercise is an almost magical way to reduce anxiety and to feel more grounded. If you have knee problems, a half squat with your back against a wall produces almost the same experience.

Stand for a moment and just pay attention to how your body feels and where your energy is...

What part of the body comes to your awareness most easily?
How much can you feel your legs and feet... the ground...?

With your feet hip-width apart, and holding onto a piece of furniture that's heavy enough not to slide, gently lower yourself into a squat position, **keeping your heels down**. This is fun to do with a partner. Stand facing each other at arm's length apart, holding each other by the wrists, and slowly squat down together. Lean back enough to let your pelvis drop down without letting your seat touch the ground.

Rest in the squat for a few breaths. (In countries where squatting is a natural position to sit for a chat, there is virtually no incidence of chronic back pain, unlike here.)

When you're ready, come up slowly, and just stand for a moment to feel what's different. Do you notice what is meant by the term "grounded"? Where is your energy now?

We say "uptight" to describe feeling stressed, and "calm down"... can you feel why?

16. SITTING TWIST

Sit tall in a straight-backed chair. Cross your right knee over the left. Tune into your breathing rhythm, slowly letting the exhalations lengthen into gentle sighs.

Keeping your ribcage lifted up away from your pelvis, your shoulders down, and your face soft and relaxed, slowly begin to turn around to the right as you breathe out.

As you inhale, stay turned and bring your left hand to the outside of your right knee. As you exhale, turn a little more to the right, without straining. Each time you inhale, simply pay attention to any tightness you feel. With each exhalation, soften and relax into the twist.

The rotation moves up from the lower back and belly, up into the ribcage, to the chest and upper back, to the shoulders, then the neck and head. Lastly the eyes turn to look behind you.

Relax out of the twist and sit for a moment. Then repeat going to the left, with the left leg crossed over the right.

The twist is a movement that invites a release of tension in the neck and back. It is important not to push or strain, but to use the breath to invite gentle release.

To release the neck, experiment with slowly turning the head or eyes only from side to side, while staying in the twist with the rest of your body.

I AM THE BREATH

The breath is Life's Teacher.

Observe me, says the breath, and learn to live effortlessly in the Present Moment.

Feel me, says the breath, and feel the Ebb and Flow of Life.

Allow me, says the breath, and I'll sustain and nourish you, filling you with energy and cleansing you of tension and fatigue.

Move with me, says the breath, and I'll invite your soul to dance.

Make sounds with me, and I shall teach your soul to sing.

Follow me, says the breath, and I'll lead you out to the farthest reaches of the Universe... and inward to the deepest parts of your inner world.

Notice, says the breath, that I am as valuable to you coming or going... that every part; of my cycle is as necessary as another... that after I'm released, I return again and again... that even after a long pause, eventually I am there.

Each time I come, says the breath, I am a gift from Life. And yet I am released without regret, without suffering, without fear.

Notice how you take me in, says the breath... is it with joy... with gratitude...? Do you take me in fully... invite me into all the inner spaces of your home? What places in you am I not allowed to nourish...?

And notice, says the breath, how you release me? Do you hold me prisoner in closed up places in the body? Do you let me go reluctantly?

And are my waves of breath, of Life, as gentle as a quiet sea, softly smoothing sandy stretches of yourself; or anxious, urgent, choppy waves; or the crashing tumult of a stormy sea?

And can you feel me as the link between your inner and outer worlds, suggests the breath... feel me as Life's exchange between the universe and you? The universe breathes me into you. You send me back to the universe. I am the flow of Life between every single part and the whole.

Your attitude to me, says the breath, is your attitude to Life. Welcome me... embrace me fully. Let me nourish you completely... then set me free. Move with me, dance with me, sing with me, sigh with me, love me, trust me, don't try to control me.

Let us play together and rejoice. I am the breath. Life is the musician. You are the flute. We are all a part of the process of Creativity.

17. EBB AND FLOW

This can be done sitting comfortably or lying down. Take a moment to feel your body relaxing. Notice your breath without trying to control it or change it. Let your eyes close and feel how the breath moves rhythmically into and out of your body.

Notice the feeling of being breathed by the breath...

Feel the ebb and flow of the breath as it comes and goes...

The inhalation and the exhalation...

The cycles of the breath, moving easily through the body...

Effortlessly... like the ebb and flow of waves at the shore...

Imagine the gentle waves of the ocean rolling onto the beach...

The pause...

Then the wave being drawn back into the sea...

Like the waves, the breath is received into the body,

only to be released once again.

18. MELTING THE ARMOUR

This can be done in any comfortable position.

Close your eyes and turn your attention softly to the breath. If it feels shallow, hum or sigh a couple of times until you feel the exhalations lengthening easily.

Keeping the breath in your awareness, begin to notice any areas of tightness or tension in the body. They will present themselves to your awareness.

Imagine these places as a kind of armour, made of a substance that can soften and melt in the breath.

Focusing on one area at a time, feel the breath moving into the tightness on the inhalation, magically softening and melting the armour of tension as you exhale.

Gradually breathe this way into all the body armour until you feel soft and relaxed all over.

An important place to use this exercise is your face...



19. UNMASKING

Continue the feeling of melting the armour of tension throughout the body, or simply begin with your face...

Notice first the sensation of breath at the edge of your nostrils and feel the breath moving up through the nose into your head space. Imagine the shape and size and colour of this space.

With the tips of your index fingers, gently trace a line up the ridge of your nose to a point just above each eyebrow. Trace out to the corners of your eyebrows, then under the eyebrows back to the bridge of the nose. Rest here for a moment.

Now lift your fingertips and start again at the outer corners of your eyes, tracing under your eyes to the nose once again. Pause.

Move your fingers over your nose and around your eyes this way several times. Then, with your eyes closed, imagine each breath softening and melting the mask of tension you wear on your face, until the face behind the face is revealed.

20. RAINBOW BREATH

Sitting or lying down comfortably, close your eyes and turn your attention to your breath. Feel any areas of tension in your body and imagine you are breathing into them directly, releasing the tightness as you breathe out.

Imagine that you are under a large rainbow of softly glowing colours – soft healing mists of colour...

Imagine breathing in one colour at a time, beginning with red, seeing and feeling the energy of red... then orange, warm and revitalizing... then yellow, golden sunshine yellow...

Continue breathing in green, and feel the wonderful quality of the green of nature at its most beautiful... breathing it in with each breath... then blue, like the sky on a clear day...

Breathe and imagine a deep indigo colour next, like the night sky just after the sun has set... and then violet, a shimmering pinkish-purple colour... breathing it in and feeling it in your body...

Now, imagine the whole rainbow once again and relax under it as you enjoy the sensations you feel.

21. RHYTHMIC BREATH

In any comfortable position, take a moment to scan your body for areas of tension and tightness, and for feelings of softness and comfort. Adjust your position if necessary to feel more relaxed.

With two fingertips, gently feel the pulse point on your wrist or neck and just observe the rhythm of your heartbeat for a moment. You may be able to feel your heartbeat without touching a pulse point, just by being still and quiet.

For a moment observe the rate and rhythm of your heartbeat. Then gradually become aware of your breathing rhythm and notice the harmony of your breath and heart...

Count the number of heartbeats per inhalation and exhalation, noting which part of the breath is longer. Become aware of the natural rhythm as it emerges. There is nothing else to do but observe this effortless rhythm of your heart and breath, enjoying a growing sense of peacefulness.

Allow yourself to pause at the end of each exhalation, without straining. This may produce even more relaxation and calm.

22. SENSORY AWARENESS

In his book, *Beyond Survival*, Jerry Coffee writes: “Life is everywhere... how little we understand through mere words; how much more is possible through opening all of our senses... opening new dimensions through which we behold beauty, experience awe, and express love.”

We can use our senses to relax as well as to be more aware. Just become aware of the visual details, the colours and shapes of whatever is around you, as if you were about to paint a picture from memory.

Close your eyes and begin to listen to all the sounds around you. Move your listening awareness out farther and farther to listen to sounds that are far away. Then bring your listening attention in close to hear even the sound of your own breathing.

For a moment, just listen to your breath and feel the sensations of the breath moving into and out of your body. Notice the parts of your body involved with this movement of the breath.

Expand your awareness into other parts of your body, feeling places where your body touches itself or your clothing or your chair or the floor. Feel textures and sensations of warmth or coolness...

Are there any smells or fragrances you're aware of... what is the taste in your mouth? Let all of your senses awaken and simply notice your experience.

Practice sensory awareness when possible while eating, and notice how different an experience it becomes.

23. MINDFULNESS

Sit or lie down comfortably. Take a couple of minutes to simply notice what your mind is doing. If you are noticing sounds, smells, images, tastes, or body sensations, this is sensing. If you notice thoughts not related to present sensory experiences, this is thinking. Just observe for a minute or so when your mind is sensing or thinking.

Begin to notice the different ways of sensing:

- seeing images...
- listening...
- smell...
- taste...
- touch...
- and other kinds of sensations...

Is your sensing more active in one “channel” than the others?

Notice your mind noticing...

Become aware of whether your thoughts take you back into the past or ahead into the future. Eventually you’ll begin to notice a tendency for past or future thinking. Sensory awareness brings us into the present, which is usually less stressful.

Mindfulness is the practice of bringing our attention to our present moment experience: thoughts, sensations, feelings... just noticing whatever is happening in the moment. This becomes a kind of meditation, a state of being fully awake and at the same time relaxed. The quality of our attention is interested but detached, discerning but nonjudgemental.

In this state of mind we feel aware of ourselves and things around us, without getting pulled off in any particular direction. Even for a minute at a time during a busy day, it is a way to get centered, calm, and “unstressed” from the inside out.

Mindfulness evokes a reverberant dynamic interaction among three dimensions of well-being – neural, mind, and relational. Our social resonance circuitry is well-suited to participate in this triangle of well-being, linking together the mapping of intention with neural integration and the ways in which we attune to each other, and to ourselves...

Mindfulness permits tranquility, even in the face of trauma or restricted memory processes that constrain the harmony and coherence of the system of the self. This is a crucial aspect of the discernment that mindfulness allows: We can learn to create new patterns of emotional regulation as we come to approach, not withdraw. From that stable, inner place of calm, the surface processes of chaos and rigidity, of dysregulation and defensive exclusion of lived experience, can now be melted away as they are recognized as “just” habits of mind, equanimity can be created, and true transformation can begin.

From *The Mindful Brain (Reflection and Attunement in the Cultivation of Well-Being)* by Daniel Siegel (2007)

24. BEAM OF LIGHT

In a comfortable position, bring your attention to your body and the sensations around and within your body. Your attention can move like a beam of light to one part of your body at a time, or expand like a spotlight to include your body as a whole.

Focus your attention like a beam of light on one hand and notice its position, the sensations of touch, of warmth, of weight...

Move the beam up your arm to your shoulder and rest your attention here for a moment, becoming completely aware of how this shoulder feels.

Move your attention to your other shoulder and then slowly down your arm to your other hand. Does this hand seem different than the first... warmer or cooler, heavier or lighter...?

Continue moving your attention like a beam of light throughout your body. You're not looking for anything in particular... just noticing each part and letting your attention rest where it does naturally.

Some parts of your body may seem to take longer to light up in your awareness... others come more easily. Experiment with moving your attention to your internal organs, your liver, your stomach, your brain, to any part that comes to mind...

Let your attention rest as softly as light on each part.

25. DIRECT YOUR MOVIE

Sit or lie down comfortably. Take a few minutes to relax and become mindful, just noticing present experience.

Then begin to consider some part of your life with which you are dissatisfied. Recall an incident or scene that goes with the situation. Slowly replay the scene in your mind's eye...

Imagine you could watch yourself in the scene... see your facial expressions, your gestures, your body language, what you're wearing. Imagine anyone else in the scene and see them the same way, their expressions and postures and how they move.

Imagine you are listening to what is being said – the words and the tone. Pay attention to the feelings that are evoked as you observe the scene. As you are watching and listening, notice any parts of this situation you would like to change.

Become the director of this movie, the scene you are imagining... You have total control – this is your movie. Imagine making the changes that would feel right for you. Begin with changes about yourself and notice if this affects anything else.

Notice any changes in how you're feeling as you picture the scene happening differently. Of course, we cannot change history. We can however reprogram our automatic reactions and change the feeling tone of certain memories.

Replay your ideal scene as often as you like until you notice a feeling of calm and well being. Then rest.

26. CLEANSING BREATH

Whenever you bring your attention to your breath, you'll notice that breathing happens without any effort or doing on your part. Yet, unintentionally, the mere fact of observing the breath often causes it to change.

We can observe our breath, a practice which brings us more fully into the present moment, and add intention to the experience in this way:

Think of the exhalation as a release... emptying the lungs of stale air, letting go of tension and fatigue in the body, even emptying the mind of thoughts and internal noise.

Close off your right nostril with your finger and breathe out through your left nostril. Imagine that as you exhale you are releasing attitudes of fear, aversion, and self-doubt, attitudes that prevent you from fully experiencing life.

After several breaths, close the left nostril and breathe out the right, releasing feelings of attachment, clinging, and grasping, attitudes that hold you back from timely change and growth.

After several breaths, just breathe normally and rest, noticing how you feel.

27. INNER SMILING

In a comfortable position, take a few moments to simply notice your present experience... notice any physical sensations, notice feelings, notice thoughts or images or your state of mind...

Bring your fingertips to your solar plexus (upper abdomen), resting them there gently. Now make an angry expression on your face, frowning and tightening your face into a scowl. Let your fingertips feel what happens in your solar plexus.

Now let your face relax and smile, letting the smile reflect an inner joy that lights up your face from the inside out.

Again, notice what happens in your solar plexus. Do you feel how your solar plexus can also smile? Relax your face, but keep the smile in your eyes and thoughts.

Gradually let this inner smile move from your abdomen into other parts of your body... your chest and throat... your lower back... your hands...

Let this inner smile express genuine delight and appreciation, and imagine that these qualities light up any area where the smile is focused.



28. ANCHORING APPRECIATION

Appreciation is a feeling that relieves stress, boosts energy, and opens the lines of communication. It's accompanied by a sense of physical expansion, which releases tension in the body and can relieve pain. And it just feels good!

Anchoring appreciation so that it can be accessed when needed involves generating the feeling by certain thoughts or memories and then locating it in the body. Start by recalling some of the things in your life that you think of as blessings. They can be from the present or from the past. They may be events or people or places. Thinking about them evokes a feeling of gratitude and joy. Sit with the feeling for a while.

Once you create and contact the feeling of appreciation, focus attention on what's happening in your body. Perhaps there's a place in your body where the feeling of appreciation seems the strongest. For a while, keep noticing the quality of this feeling.

Along with the sensation and the feeling of appreciation, let a visual symbol come to mind, one that represents the same quality of feeling... perhaps it's a memory, or an image from nature. It may be simply a shape or colour. Just see what seems to pop up as a symbol. You could imagine placing this image in the part of the body where you notice the feeling.

Finally, add a word or phrase to go with the feeling and the symbol... perhaps just a name, or "thank you" or "Mmmmm" or "I feel blessed". Pick the words that seem just right for you.

Now appreciation has a feeling quality, a body sensation, a visual symbol and words to link the body with the mind. This anchors appreciation as a resource that you can access when you need to by recalling the words, or the image, or bringing attention to the part of the body where you locate it now.

A BLESSING

May you awaken to the mystery of being here and enter the quiet immensity of your own presence.

May you have joy and peace in the temple of your senses.

May you receive great encouragement when new frontiers beckon.

May you respond to the call of your gift and find the courage to follow its path.

May the flame of anger free you from falsity.

May warmth of heart keep your presence aflame and may anxiety never linger about you.

May your outer dignity mirror an inner dignity of soul.

May you take time to celebrate the quiet miracles that seek no attention.

May you be consoled in the secret symmetry of your soul.

May you experience each day as a sacred gift woven around the heart of wonder.

John O'Donohue (Anam Cara)

29. PAST SELF – FUTURE SELF

Sit quietly and just notice your thoughts for a moment. Notice your breathing.

Begin to let yourself drift back with each breath into the past. Drift back to a time when you were younger, a time when you were upset or anxious. Imagine if you could sit as you are now with this younger version of yourself.

Knowing what you know now, what could you have told yourself that would have been comforting, reassuring? How might you have spoken about your future successes, your untapped strengths, the resources that would become available to you...? What did you need to hear then?

After spending some time with this younger version of yourself, just rest again for a moment and notice your breathing. Now begin to let yourself drift ahead, with each breath, into a time in the future. Imagine you are sitting now with an older version of yourself, a wiser and more experienced “you”...

Let this future self communicate something to you... about the successes in store for you, the blessings that Life will bring. If there is something you're worrying about in your life now, let this future version of you reassure and comfort you the way you did with your “past self”. Listen for what you most need to hear.

Now, just relax again for a few minutes, noticing your thoughts and feelings, your body and your breath.

30. SUSTAINABLE SUCCESS

Look again at the questionnaire at the beginning of the book. Is there a particular question that seems important to changing your outlook or responses to life?

Sustainable success is not just a matter of balancing our stress with relaxation, nor is it just making sure we balance work and play or what we do for others and what we do for ourselves.

The real secret to “sustainable success” is in letting ourselves be nourished all the time, in loving what we do, or at least appreciating something in every moment of life.

Make a checklist of the following components of sustainable success and appreciate the ones you are already doing:

1. Know what you want, what your goals are. Know your motives.
2. Observe your thoughts and have your self-talk fit your goals.
3. Do what you need to do to reach those goals. Take action.
4. Learn to relax and be present. “You can’t do what you want till you know what you’re doing.” (Moshe Feldenkrais)
5. Respond to setbacks creatively. See crisis as opportunity.

CONCLUSION

If you practise even a few of these little exercises for a few weeks, you'll begin to notice changes in how you're handling stressful situations and responding to life generally.

I like to hear the word responsibility as response-ability, remembering that the key to getting unstressed, from the inside out, is through reclaiming our ability to respond creatively to whatever life hands us.

All around us are people who are inspiring examples of creative responses to difficult and challenging situations. Think about someone you know that you admire for the way they move through life.

In your mind's eye, hold an image of this person in front of you and see through the surface to the deeper quality that you find most inspiring. Is it calmness, or patience or compassion? Do you see in him or her an inner strength, or confidence or courage?

Begin to realize that whatever you see in someone else is a reflection of a quality that is much harder to see in yourself. You couldn't recognize it if you didn't already know it. Imagine that the person you are admiring is a mirror, and those qualities you admire are a reflection of what is already within you. Can you feel where those qualities dwell inside you? One final story about my son...

When he was very little, about three or four years old, we were walking side by side down the street.

I said to him, "Sweetie, please do your coat up." He said, "I'm fine." I repeated, "Do your coat up, sweetie, it's cold out."

Once again he said, "No, I'm fine." I was insistent. "Adam, do your coat up. You'll get cold." He stopped in his tracks, looked up at me, and said, "Don't you think I know if I'm cold or not?"

He was so right! I said, "Okay, promise me if you get cold, you'll do up your coat." And he said, "I will." He was not about to give up easily the responsibility, and the response-ability, for his own comfort. Thank goodness. (Out of the mouths of babes.)

Where we have given up our response-ability, we have let ourselves become victims. Life is not out to get us unless we think it is. Near his death, Einstein was asked what was the most important question man needs to answer. His response was that we each need to decide "Is the universe friendly?" How we answer that question for ourselves determines how we live our life.

The poet Rumi wrote these lines many centuries ago:

Stay here quivering, like a drop of mercury.

This moment, every moment,

if it is genuinely inside you,

brings what you need.

(translation by Coleman Barks)

Living creatively and successfully means getting unstressed from the inside out. You can do it.

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