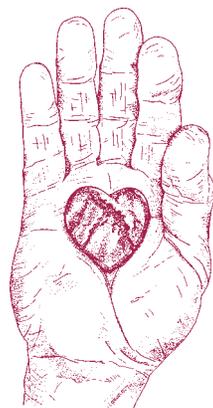


WORKING OUT YOUR STRESS

Using Exercise and Bodywork
to De-stress

Structural Integration



Body-Centered Therapy

“HOLISTIC BODYWORK THAT REALLY WORKS”

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What is Stress?

How often have we all heard ourselves or others say “I’m so stressed out”? But what does that really mean? What is stress really, and how can we effectively cope with its effects? Dr. Hans Selye, the pioneering researcher on stress, defines stress as: “the non specific demand on the body from any source.” He further divides it into eustress (good), that which causes a positive effect on the body, or distress (bad) that which causes a long-term negative effect on the body. Working out or sex for example break down the body and deplete energy reserves, but ultimately the body and psyche rebound to a better or healthier state. Chronic stress such as is often found at work or in bad relationships triggers an instinctual “fight or flight” response in our bodies that create a whole flood of physiological changes:

1. Adrenaline, cortisol and norepinephrine and other glucocorticoids are released into the bloodstream tensing our muscles and energizing us.
2. Heart rate and blood pressure increase.
3. Breathing becomes rapid and shallow.
4. Digestive processes slow down or stop.
5. Clotting factor in the blood goes up.
6. And many, many other changes occur.

We are only supposed to be in this state for a short period of time, because the long term consequences of prolonged stress, hyper vigilance, and the fight or flight response are extremely damaging to the body, its immune system, your psyche and your health. Normally the parasympathetic (calming, restorative) branch of the nervous system dominates, but fear as well as other strong emotions stimulate the sympathetic (excitatory, depletive) branch and cause a “fight or flight” response or its precursor hyper vigilance.

Unfortunately for us, these mechanisms were developed millions of years ago, and we are not designed for the world we live in now. Essentially stress is your body responding with the “fight or flight” response when there is none. We as humans have created change at a far more rapid pace than our bodies’ ability to adapt to it.

Chronic illness, hypertension in the external musculature, headaches, psychological problems, and more dire effects are the prolonged effects of chronic stress. Not only is the immune system weakened and hence your ability to fight off opportunistic infections, as well as carcinogenic cells, but there is also acute damage to the cardiovascular system which can lead to heart problems, damage to bone mass, suppression of the reproductive system (affecting sexuality), memory and mental problems. Stress also contributes to headaches, ulcers, colitis, chronic back pain, psoriasis, TMJ, asthma, allergies and worsens autoimmune disorders. “Fight or flight” or hyper vigilance are a constant state of high arousal, it is as if your body is given the instructions to get on its mark, to get ready, to get set, to get set, to get set...with no GO. The effects of stress are cumulative over time taking its toll on our health, happiness and well being.

The Relaxation Response

So what can a person do? Dr. Herbert Benson coined the term “the relaxation response” when identifying what he saw as a major antidote to the effects of stress. He defines this essentially as any “meditational” activity that induces an alpha or calm brain wave state. The only problem with this solution is that we Westerners and Type A personalities; those who are highly competitive, have a sense of time urgency, and have a low anger threshold (you know who you are!), have a difficult time accessing such states. Further, there is a more effective way to first purge the body of all the stress induced symptoms, and do what the body inherently wants to do – which, is to move; either by some form of exercise or deep bodywork that loosens the muscles and calms the nervous system. Because the body is preparing for “fight or flight”, by “working out” or being worked on, we are effectively purging the system and allowing it to return to its natural calm state of homeostasis or balance. Further the effect will be increased if we engage in a “flow” sport; a rhythmic, cyclical activity such a running, cycling, rollerblading, cross country skiing, swimming, etc.. All of these have a hypnotic effect on the mind allowing it to enter into an alpha state more easily. This process is furthered if we work out in nature, a more natural calming environment that will allow us to attune to its soothing harmonious vibration without the ego distractions and social complications of gyms and competitive sports.

By a process known as “attunement” your body will tend to gravitate or attune to the stronger electromagnetic frequency of the earth, “the Schumann Resonance” which is, by the way, 8–12 cycles per second which coincides with the same frequency as alpha brain waves in a meditative state! For those times when this is not possible a gym or home gym will suffice but will not be as effective in achieving stress reduction.

Exercise increases the neurotransmitters dopamine and serotonin which help with mood regulation, anxiety control, and the ability to handle stress. Once completed your body will slowly return to a fully relaxed state replete with a euphoric dose of endorphins, which put us into an even better state of being. If we then wish to engage in any meditational activity of our choice, it is more easily accessed and in either case our bodies and psyches are in a better place. Obviously the best time to “work out” your stress is at the end of the day, but if morning is the only time available, it too has positive effects.

Utilizing Bodywork

Bodywork, especially deep work, also has a powerful effect in relieving the symptoms of stress. The norepinephrine produced by our nerve cells that creates so much contraction or hyper tonicity in the external musculature cannot be relieved by light work since the myofascial envelope has shortened, thickened and adhered and must be altered in order for the muscles to effectively relax and move freely. Whereas light work is calming, its effects are generally short lived. For maximum benefit, the myofascial envelope of the body must be opened up not just so the musculature can return to a natural balance, but also so that energy, blood, and lymphatic fluid can flow more freely in the body so then the body can return to its natural state of health.

One of the primary functions of deep bodywork such as Structural Integration is to reduce the level of stress imposed on the body by chronically shortened muscles. This is accomplished by the applying of slow, compressive and lengthening procedures to the involved musculature. The effects of chronically shortened, tense muscles are many; circulation of blood and lymph is inhibited, constricting muscles, which act as dams blocking fluids and energy from flowing freely

throughout the body. It must be remembered that in an open body system energy exchange must be efficient for the system to function properly:

1. Waste products of metabolism build up and hence toxicity results in weakness and possibly pain.
2. An environment for disease to easily take hold is created.
3. Motor skills, movement and performance are impaired.
4. The body is pulled out of balance and alignment, causing postural distortion and structural stress and possibly injury.
5. Fascial tissue builds up around points of stress to reinforce those areas limiting movement and predisposing us to injury and pain.

In short, it is an overall game plan for unhealthiness and pain.

Flow States

Like meditation, bodywork produces an increase in brain alpha waves and changes in the autonomic nervous system, which helps balance it, expand its limits and relieve stress and tension, thus eliminating the cause of most stress induced diseases. Bodywork and exercise then are an antidote to the severe stress modern humans find in their lives and should be viewed as “moving meditations” that helps cleanse the body and the spirit.

To further this effect of utilizing exercise as a meditation we must enter into a “flow” state. A hallmark of a “flow” state is a feeling of spontaneity, freedom and joy. You are in the moment, not in thought and utterly absorbed in what you are doing. Focused concentration in a relatively relaxed state is a hallmark of being in a state of “flow”, which is devoid of emotional static. Entering “flow” we are one, intentionally focusing sharp attention to the task at hand, a highly concentrated state, calm and focused. It offers relief from the emotional turbulence of our lives with the task becoming almost effortless. In an activity you do often, spontaneous pleasure, grace and effectiveness that characterizes flow, are incompatible with emotional hijacking and cause a lessening of cortical arousal. You are relaxed yet highly focused and in a “moving meditation” rather than a

strained concentration which produces worry or anxiety. Often practiced moves cause less brain effort, and you yourself are in such an ecstatic state to such a point that you feel that time and self don't exist. Regularity is more important than length and it is important to choose something that you enjoy. Exercise helps balance the autonomic nervous system, creates a rise in serotonin levels and endorphins, which are euphoric and help to numb pain.

Positive Benefits

When a person is under stress, it is like a slow deliberate trauma being delivered to the body. Continued stress, whether emotional or physical, can shorten and tighten connective tissue often causing adhesions to the point that pain is experienced throughout the body, often in critical areas of the head, neck, back and shoulders. Recent studies have shown that exercise, if done regularly, is a remarkably effective treatment for anxiety and depression, often as effective as SSRI's such as Zoloft, Prozac and Paxil. Psychological studies have found that bodywork is roughly as effective as psychotherapy in the treatment of anxiety and depression. It was found that one session of bodywork therapy reduced depression and anxiety for as much as several weeks after treatments ended. Multiple sessions worked even better. Because bodywork therapy may induce physical change, they speculate the combination of psychotherapy and bodywork may be more potent than either alone.

Dr. Andrew Weil, in February 2006 edition of *Self-Healing*, reports studies on touch show that it reduces stress, eases arthritis pain, increases air flow in asthmatics, and improves immune function. Research shows that babies who receive little physical affection develop abnormally. In a touch deprived culture like ours, people of all ages need to find ways to touch and to be touched. Tools like hand held massagers can't replicate the human interaction. The many benefits of touch are attributed to a reduction in the stress hormone cortisol produced by the adrenal glands. Scientists have observed changes in heart rate and blood pressure after bodywork, and noted changes in the brain chemicals thought to affect stress and pain. Bodywork at moderate to deep pressure was effective at lowering cortisol levels, while light touch showed no effect. Research, done with HIV and

breast cancer patients, shows that touch had a positive effect on the immune system including decreased cortisol levels.

In a 2009 survey by ABMP (Association of Bodywork and Massage Professionals) it showed that 81% of Americans are as stressed or more stressed than one year ago. Studies at the Touch Research Institute found that bodywork effectively reduces the stress hormone cortisol by up to 53% and also increases levels of dopamine and serotonin. Bodywork over time creates a cumulative stress reduction effect. Experts agree that more than 90% of disease is stress related and nothing ages us faster inside or out than the effects of stress. Healing input influences healing output. Frequent bodywork can reduce the accumulation of stress and improve overall health, by increasing production of endorphin and serotonin, improving sleep and by calming the mind. Particularly, deep structural work offsets the muscle tightening effects of constant high levels of norepinephrine. Consistency of bodywork therapy over time creates a cumulative stress reduction effect.

Essentially, if you want to move negative emotional states, you have to move your body, or have someone move your body for you. So, whether you choose to "work out" your stress yourself through exercise and/or you choose to have a practitioner work it out for you, the effects of both are powerful and healthful. A combination of the two is particularly effective and complimentary, and that is a system I personally utilize and recommend. It is then easier to regularly engage in your own personal choice of meditative "flow" activities to further enhance your overall health and well being.