

RELAXATION BASICS

In 1670 Blaise Pascal wrote: “I have discovered that all man's unhappiness derives from only one source--not being able to sit quietly in a room.” In response, a friend of mine wrote: “I have discovered that all man's unhappiness derives from one source—not being able to lock certain people in a quiet room” (Watkins, 1997). Together, I believe these quotations capture most of the essentials of a *reasonably* peaceful life: intentional stillness, solitude, and quiet (sitting in a room); relationship, self-preservation, and assertiveness (*locking* someone in a room); and humor.

The rest of this article is a practical elaboration of the following statement:

To live a realistically healthy and peaceful life, we must attend to our **Physical, Cognitive, and Emotional** selves.

If you take yourself and your life seriously and are willing to spend at least *five minutes a day* consciously practicing some form of relaxation (not including naps or television), you can significantly increase your sense of well-being.

[Small print: a chronic inability to be still and quiet for five minutes probably means there is a significant obstacle to peace in your life, which may require professional help.]

YOUR PHYSICAL SELF: As long as you are conscious you can use the rhythm of your breathing as a focus for relaxation: Sit comfortably upright and simply pay attention to how your breath moves into your nostrils, through your lungs, to your diaphragm, and back out; When you begin, limit yourself to five minutes. Sometimes counting your breaths from 1 - 10 can help focus your mind, and most people find early morning or late evening to be the easiest times to set aside for this, but during your body's “down time” in the late afternoon can be good, too.

Sometimes, when still, pay attention to your physical sensations. Notice where you tense up and where you hold your anxiety. Become aware of how your emotions affect you and are expressed in your body. Greater awareness can reduce our automatic responses and give us more freedom in how we react to our environment.

Also, stretching, good nutrition, consistent and sufficient sleep, and regular exercise will add to your capacity for peacefulness. Human touch, such as embraces and massage, comfort us at a fundamental level.

YOUR COGNITIVE SELF: As John Milton wrote, “The mind is its own place/ and in itself can make/ a Heav'n of Hell/ or a Hell of Heav'n.” While there are many “mind

traps” we fall into regularly, keeping us chronically anxious—and we each have our favorites—a couple of mental exercises can significantly help us back to peace of mind.

1) Follow your fears to their extremes: “I’m worried about getting bad grades; if I get bad grades they’ll throw me out of school; if they throw me out of school I won’t be able to get a job and I’ll be too ashamed to face my family; so I’ll be homeless and will eventually lose my mind.” Tracking our anxiety can be difficult at first, but doing this in writing makes it easier to see our leaps of “logic” and our irrational conclusions. (That was an irrational conclusion.)

2) Use breathing and stretching techniques to interrupt your mind-body feedback loop: Scary thoughts arouse our body’s nervous system (“fight or flight”), which then sends stronger signals to our brain confirming we are in danger, which further arouses our body.... The extreme of this is a panic attack.

3) Stay in the present moment.

4) Whenever you find yourself outside the present moment, caught up in thoughts, ask yourself if this is *helpful thinking* (planning, problem-solving, evaluating, etc.) or *unhelpful thinking* (ruminating, catastrophizing, obsessing, judging, wishing, etc.), and if it’s the latter, just bring yourself back to being engaged in the activity of the moment, whether that’s breathing or driving or whatever.

5) Be aware if you are trying to lessen your fears by controlling others and/or trying remove all uncertainty from your life (which is not possible).

YOUR EMOTIONAL SELF: There is now undeniable evidence that emotional suppression leads to physiological and psychological ills, making it all the harder to keep our peace. In addition, Daniel Goleman (*Emotional Intelligence*, 1995), Antonio Damasio (*The Feeling of What Happens*, 2000), and others write convincingly that rational thinking cannot occur without ready access to the full range of our emotions.

So what can you do to improve your peace of mind by enhancing your emotional life? Make sure you have at least two people you can be open with and depend on, and vice versa. Keep a word or art journal where you record and express your feelings. Join a group or a team that allows you to interact regularly with other people. And when you sit quietly listening to your breath *for at least five minutes a day*, learn to “listen” to your body and feelings, as well. Give them a chance to be experienced. Both “good” and “bad” emotions will pass through you in their own season, like the ebbing and flowing of your breath.

If you consistently apply these simple practices to your daily life, you will enjoy increasing peace of mind.

I have known a great many troubles,
but most of them never happened.

Mark Twain