



What

WORKS



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Restoring Physical Balance - Part 1

Tension creates imbalance in mind, body, and emotions. You become physically tight, mentally stuck, and emotionally reactive under stress. Fortunately, balance is part of our nature. Regaining balance involves understanding how nature restores health to body, mind, and emotions, and then removing obstacles that interfere with that process. We will be talking about restoring physical balance in this article and the next, followed by articles on restoring mental and emotional balance.

Physical tension is easy to feel and recognize if you pay attention to it and catch it early. The problem is that we become less aware of tension as it builds. Once tension becomes a habit, "uptight" begins to feel like "normal."

Tension results when your body prepares for action and then holds back. This can be helpful if you need to act within a few seconds or minutes, but it creates wear and tear on your body, wastes energy, and tends to make

you impatient and irritable as it builds up over time. It's not only your muscles that get out of balance. Your nervous system, internal organs, and even the chemistry of your blood change as tension builds. Your body's ability to resist or recover from illness or disease is diminished, which means you're more likely to get sick, and less likely to recover quickly.

Here's how it works: The build-up of tension is controlled by the part of your nervous system that determines where energy goes in your body (it's called the Autonomic Nervous System). Energy in your body either goes to your muscles for work, or it goes to your internal organs to perform maintenance.

Like any system that performs work and needs maintenance, these two parts of the nervous system work opposite each other. You don't tune up your car while you're driving it down the road. If you want to fix or maintain your car, you shut it off and let it cool down first. The same is true with your body. If you eat a huge meal right before running a race, you will neither run nor feel very well.

If you look at the anatomy of the two branches of this nervous system, you will see a connection between them that suppresses one when the other is activated. If both need to work, muscles win because they are needed for short-term survival. In other words, if you're being chased by a bear, it doesn't matter if you digest breakfast - what matters is that you have enough energy to get away from the bear so you don't become his breakfast.

Physical tension involves muscles working without moving. When your muscles are

working, your body is not effectively carrying out the basic maintenance that keeps you healthy. This is a survival mechanism that works against you in modern life. When your body recognizes a certain level of tension, it acts as if there is a threat and sends extra energy to your muscles by releasing stress hormones into your bloodstream. This changes the chemistry of your blood to give an extra boost to your muscles. This is why tension and stress tend to snowball. Built-up tension causes the release of stress hormones, which sends an extra charge to your muscles, which is then used to build more tension. Your body reacts to increased tension by releasing more stress hormones creating even more tension in a self-escalating process that continues until you take steps to recover (or something breaks down).

Restoring balance tends to require more than a good workout, a relaxing weekend, or even a week's vacation. Balance is not restored to your Autonomic Nervous system until you get the excess stress hormones out of your bloodstream. This is a simple (but rather precise) process that requires regular daily practice over time. It involves how you breathe.

Here's how it works: The major nerve (right vagus nerve) that sends energy to your internal organs to maintain your body's health is about the size of your thumb, and runs down the center of your body. There is a muscle at the bottom of your lungs called the diaphragm, which is shaped like a parachute. This nerve passes through a small opening in the center of the diaphragm. When the diaphragm moves in a slow, continuous



rhythm without pause, it stimulates the right vagus nerve and activates your maintenance system, shutting down the build up of tension and starting the process of recovery.

When you allow air to reach the bottom of your lungs, the diaphragm moves down, and rises up again as you breathe out. (When you breathe in, your belly will move out as the diaphragm pushes down on your stomach and intestines.) Sometimes this is called "abdominal" or "belly" breathing. However it only works if the movement of your belly results from the rhythmic action of the diaphragm.

When you do this properly, you'll feel more calm and relaxed within a minute. If you then stop, tension starts to build again because the stress hormones in your blood will re-activate your muscles. My clients and students consistently regain balance when they practice diaphragmatic breathing for five minutes, six to ten times per day for four weeks. That gives your liver (part of your body's maintenance system) enough time to clean the stress hormones out of your blood so your nervous system gets back into balance.

Diaphragmatic breathing only works when your diaphragm is moving in a slow, continuous rhythm without extra effort. It doesn't work if you try too hard by using your

muscles to pull the breath in. (Remember muscles always win, and maintenance is diminished when muscles are working) It also doesn't work if you hold your breath, or breathe too fast or slow. Three to four seconds as you inhale and three to four seconds as you exhale without pause establishes the proper rhythm.

It is not unusual to have a build up of tension around the diaphragm, which makes it difficult to get it moving correctly. However, diaphragmatic breathing is a natural process, and I have yet to meet anyone who cannot relearn it. There is a link to a video which demonstrates diaphragmatic breathing under the Stress Management tab on my website at www.bobvanoosterhout.com

My students are required to practice diaphragmatic breathing along with three other balance techniques for ten consecutive days. Here is what a couple of them wrote after completing this exercise:

"Probably the most surprising and beneficial change has been the decline in anxiety. In addition, I've been able to steer away negative thoughts and feelings. I am way more calm and better able to cope with stressful situations. I can 'take a step back' in situations where I would have blown a gasket beforehand. I do not feel so edgy or frenzied and can get more accomplished. I think

after 10 days of using these techniques they are a part of my life already. I am doing the breathing without even thinking about it."

"I feel clearer, more focused, and overall more lucid. Finally, I have more energy. Most noticeably in the evening. Normally by the end of the day I'm beat, used-up and ready to go to bed when my 8 year old daughter goes to bed. These last few days, however, I have nearly the same energy at six o'clock that I had at noon."

Regularly practicing diaphragmatic breathing restores balance to your nervous system, and allows you to recover from built-up tension. It's one more thing you can do to take charge of your health.

About Bob Van Oosterhout

Bob Van Oosterhout is a Licensed Masters Social Worker and Limited Licensed Psychologist who provides counseling to patients at MidMichigan Health Park - Houghton Lake. He teaches Stress Management both on-line and on-campus in the Physical Fitness and Wellness Department at Lansing Community College. Additional writing and resources along with previous and future articles in this series can be found on his website at www.bobvanoosterhout.com

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