

Words of Wisdom

As human beings, our greatness lies not so much in being able to remake the world - that is the myth of the 'atomic age' - as in being able to remake ourselves. Gandhi

When you find peace within yourself, you become the kind of person who can live at peace with others. Anonymous

If you could get rid of yourself just once, the secret of secrets would open to you. The face of the unknown, hidden beyond the universe would appear on the mirror of your perception.
Rumi

He who lives in harmony with himself lives in harmony with the universe.
Marcus Aurelius

Sometimes your joy is the source of your smile, but sometimes your smile can be the source of your joy. Thich Nhat Hanh

To be mindful of social phenomena is thus to identify more clearly hatred, greed, and delusion as well as the seeds of wisdom and compassion both around us and in us.
Donald Rothberg

To enjoy good health, to bring true happiness to one's family, to bring peace to all, one must first discipline and control one's own mind. If a man can control his mind he can find the way to Enlightenment, and all wisdom and virtue will naturally come to him.
The Buddha

If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion. The Dalai Lama

Shortcuts to Inner Peace: A System for Stress Management

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Sylvia, my client of several months, sat across from me, clearly agitated. This forty-something woman, mother of two teenage boys, going through a divorce but still living under the same roof with her soon-to-be-ex, crossed her denim clad legs exclaiming, "I'm SOOOO stressed out!"

"Have you ever tried meditation?" I asked. This was a question that I usually asked clients at some point in our work together. Studies have demonstrated that relaxed meditative states sooth our stress response and stimulate feelings of calm (e.g., Tange et al. 2007). And after practicing meditation for quite a few years myself, I was convinced that it could help

her.

But I was also ready for her response.

“Hah!” she barked. “You know I don’t have time for that!” She was a single mom with a full time job, a house to run, and a to-do list that never ended. She really did seem too busy to meditate.

I knew that her lifestyle was stressful, that chronic activation of her sympathetic nervous system (SNS) was no doubt taking its toll. So I persisted, “I could teach you techniques that you could do in three minutes . . . even one minute.”

Sylvia responded, slowly, “You know, I have to be honest. Even if I had the time, I don’t think I would do it. I’ve tried meditation and quite frankly, it’s a little boring. When I close my eyes and sit quietly, my mind wanders. I just think of the million and one things I’ve got to do and then I get even more stressed.”

Hmmm. I appreciated her honesty with herself and with me. It wasn’t the first time that I had heard this from a client (or a friend). Sylvia seemed stuck in a spiral of stress reactions and negativity. Her high cortisol levels were unlikely to induce a mellow mental state. Perhaps I had hit a dead end.

I mused to myself that what I really needed were some fast, easy tools that would stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) and generate some of the same benefits achieved by lengthy meditations: stillness, calm and a feeling of inner peace. I knew that current neuroscientific research was suggesting that even small changes in our mental habits, if used persistently and mindfully, create new neural pathways in the brain (Siegel 2010), new ways of perceiving, new habits of thought.

But how would I ensure persistent and continuous use of any tool with a woman who barely had time to use the bathroom? Hmmm . . . come to think of it, she did actually find the time to go to the bathroom, multiple times a day.

“Well let’s see,” I brainstormed, “You have time to wash your hands after you use the bathroom, right?” She laughed, “Yeah, usually!” “What if I gave you a tool to use – a shortcut – something to calm yourself that isn’t a formal meditation but that you could do when you washed your hands?” I ad-libbed. “She smiled . . . she laughed, “That would be perfect.”

And thus, in one of those in-the-session improv moments, I gave her the instruction to say the words “I go with the flow” (or “I flow with life’s direction” or even “I trust the divine flow of the Universe”) each and every time she washed her hands. And, I specifically advised her not to say this mantra hastily, by rote, but to use the moment as a restorative, reflective pause . . . to really absorb the moment of acceptance and calm. And I also suggested that she use warm water, a further boost to activating her PSN.

When Sylvia came back the next week, she was happy to report that she had been able to integrate the “Go with the Flow” tool successfully into her day and that it was fun, easy and actually made her feel better. “Do you have any more shortcuts like that?” she asked.

The Shortcuts

And so I was inspired to sit down and outline some ‘shortcuts to inner peace.’ I looked for restorative tools that would activate the PNS and/or redirect neural pathways through the intentional creation of positive emotional experiences. Drawing on techniques from Eastern and Western traditions, such as yoga, Buddhism, cognitive-behavioral therapy, and positive psychology, I assembled ways to dampen the fight-or-flight stress response and stimulate the mind/body to disengage from strong reactivity to external circumstances.

What I realized, however, was that while there are many great tools out there for reducing stress, if we forget or fail to use them then they’re about as helpful as a bottle of unopened

vitamins collecting dust in the back of the pantry. Yet, we've all noticed that we are more likely to take our morning vitamin if we pair it with the habit of eating breakfast. Likewise, Sheila remembered to use the "Go with the Flow" shortcut because it was triggered by washing her hands, an already established activity.

We all know how potent a trigger can be in our emotional world: sounds or smells that evoke childhood impressions, words or phrases that recreate trauma. I wanted to harness the power of the trigger in a positive way, to create automatic responses that were as reliable as saying "Bless you" after hearing someone sneeze.

Habits are established neuronal pathways. When we intentionally respond to a trigger in a new way, new neuronal pathways are formed. Over time, our brains' usual 'wired' response to a trigger actually changes.

These shortcuts to inner peace, then, are ways to form new, healthy wiring via habits that stimulate calm and reinforce positive mental states. The strategy of linking tools to triggers sets the stage for weaving restorative pauses consistently throughout the day.

Below are a few more shortcuts that when used alone or together create a daily thread of peacefulness and calm.

Morning glories (triggered by brushing your teeth in the morning) As you brush your teeth in the morning, think of 3 things that you will be facing in your day. Don't identify them as 'good' or 'bad', 'fun' or 'stressful', simply view them as an observer and imagine that you will be 'open' to them as experiences, much as a morning glory will open to the sun. State your intention of receptivity and feel yourself relax into each one as you say: "Today, I will be open to the meeting with curiosity; Today, I will be open to the class with curiosity; Today I will be open to the phone conference with curiosity." As you encounter the 3 things during your day, remember to be 'open' and to be curious. Perhaps you'll need to exclaim, "Oh! this is how it's going to unfold today." Optionally, you could identify 3 positive qualities (rather than 3 events) that you wish to be receptive to, such as love, patience, or abundance.

This tool uses intention, or 'inclining the mind', as a means to adopt a more positive feeling throughout the day. When we consciously and repeatedly redirect our mind to positive emotions, it not only stimulates the calming effects of the PNS but the feelings become part of our emotional memory and we begin training our brains to think more positively (Hanson 2009: chap 4).

Perspectives on Self-Care

Be careful with all self-help methods (including those presented in this Bulletin), which are no substitute for working with a licensed healthcare practitioner. People vary, and what works for someone else may not be a good fit for you. When you try something, start slowly and carefully, and stop immediately if it feels bad or makes things worse.

Stop, Drop and Roll (triggered by sitting at a red traffic light) 'Stop', 'drop' down into your heart, and 'roll' out a little good will to your fellow travelers. Look at the people in other cars in front of you, behind you, passing around you and recognize that each one of them is just like you: they want happiness and they want to be free from suffering. To each person you focus on say or think something like: "May you know happiness."

"May you be free from suffering." "Peace be with you." "I hope you have a nice day."

With each person, let the feelings of good will and love sink into your heart. You can even put your hand over your own heart for added emphasis.

This tool is inspired by the Buddhist practice of metta, or loving kindness. As a habit, it opens the heart, cultivates compassion, and increases feelings of peacefulness. The practice of loving kindness has been shown to produce positive emotions (Fredrickson et al. 2008). By stimulating the neural pathways for compassion in the brain, our attitude of loving kindness toward others becomes increasingly 'wired' into the brain. Warm feelings toward others also stimulate the

PNS (Oatley, Kelter and Jenkins 2006:128), calming our resistance and putting us in a place where loving kindness flows more easily.

Shakedown (triggered by approaching the door when you come home from work) Before you walk through the door, spend a moment shaking down your body, as if you are shaking off water. Shake and relax your right leg and foot; then your left leg and foot. Shake and relax your right arm and hand then your left arm and hand. Gently shake and relax your head letting your shoulders and tongue relax. Finish with a little twist of your torso to shake off any remaining energy from your day. Take a deep breath and heave a hearty sigh (a prolonged exhalation.)

This tool uses relaxation and breath to activate the PNS and down-regulate the SNS which further relaxes the body and reduces the production of stress hormones (Hanson 2007) allowing us to leave some of our stressful energy at the door.

Rest In Peace (triggered by having your head rest on the pillow before you go to sleep) As you are in bed starting to fall asleep, review your day and list 3 things that happened for which you are grateful. Don't just vaguely remember each instance but actively recall it and recreate the experience of it. Hold the feeling and attempt to absorb it in your heart.

Gratitude is a practice known to enhance joy, cultivate happiness, and connect us with a feeling of inner peace. This tool is a way of training our brains towards positive emotions. Much has been said of our human brain's "negativity bias". But by focusing on and re-experiencing specific aspects of our life in an intentionally positive light, we create positive emotional experiences which improve our psychological well-being (Fredrickson and Branigan 2005).

Like most people with families, friends, work and overall busy lives, I often feel that my body's stress response has the upper hand. But when I practice these and other shortcuts throughout my day, every day, they become habitual. As a result, I feel happier, calmer, and more grateful.

Simply put, linking restorative tools to daily triggers actively and positively changes our brains and nurtures our nervous systems. In response, we can't help but feel a little more at peace.

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Fare Well *May you and all beings be happy, loving, and wise.*