

Resolving Stress in the Body

Today is the sixth in a series of articles on mindfulness. If you would like to review any of the prior entries, you can find them on my website at www.drmcquaid.com. To review, mindfulness is a form of stress reduction. In the simplest terms, mindfulness is paying attention to the present moment without judgment. It focuses our attention on the only moment in which we are alive, which is right now. Paying attention in this way can reduce stress, depression, anxiety and even potentially bring about healing. Today I will explore how to resolve tension in the body.

For many people stress in life produces stress in the body. I see this relationship first hand in my Podiatry practice. People with high stress levels can develop high blood pressure, stomach ulcers, chronic pain and even foot problems. It can be a vicious cycle because having pain can cause stress and stress can lead to increased pain. Using mindfulness as a way to reduce stress, and can help our bodies relax and feel better.

Before we begin to resolve stress in the body, it is helpful to understand that most emotional and physical pain is due to resistance. The famous Psychoanalyst, Carl Jung said, “Whatever you resist, will persist.” So the challenge, dear reader, is to face our difficulties head on, and let go of resistance. The interesting relationship between mindfulness and resistance is that nothing needs to change in your life situation. The only change you need to make is the willingness to be right here, right now, even if it does not feel good. Your life is unfolding anyway, so it is a wise choice to be present, for better or worse. When you do this on a consistent basis, the “or worse” part can be resolved. It is helpful to see your life as an adventure. That adventure does not have to have tragedy and peril. We have the option to add peace and calm as part of the adventure. It is your choice.

In order to add peace and calm to the body, we need to spend some time on focused relaxation which we call the body scan. To put this mindfulness exercise to practice, you will need at least twenty minutes to do this exercise. Find a comfortable place to lie down where you will not be disturbed. Turn off your cell phone or any other potential disturbance. Our intention is not to fall asleep, but to fall awake.

Begin the body scan by lying comfortably on your back, either on the floor or in bed. Close your eyes and breathe in through your nose pulling the air into your belly. Notice that your breath is happening of its own. Your breathing is spontaneous, you do not cause your lungs to breathe, they simply function on their own. Now we are going to move our awareness to sequential areas of the body, paying attention to the body part and our breathing.

Begin with the eyes. Notice the darkness behind your eyelids. Concentrate on relaxing the muscles that surround them. Breathe deeply and imagine your breath flowing in and out of your eyes, rather than your nostrils. Each time you exhale, imagine the tension flowing out of your eyes along with your breath. When you notice your eyes begin to relax, move to your jaw. The same instructions apply. Focus on relaxing the muscles

around your jaw. Breathe in and out with the intention of relaxing this area. Next pay attention to the tongue; let it fall into a relaxed position and breathe into it. When you feel your jaw give way to relaxation, move to your forehead. Next, repeat the process to relax the muscles of your head.

After your head is relaxed, move sequentially down to all areas of your body. The same instructions apply. Inhale and exhale relaxing that body part. Move from the throat, shoulders, arms, hands, chest, stomach, pelvis, legs and end with the feet. Examine each section of your body; notice its tension and then allow it to relax. Let go of any judgments and resistance. As you focus on each area of your body, breathe deeply and imagine you're breathing in and out through each particular body part. Each time you exhale, let the air pass through that area and carry the tension away with it.

Like all mindfulness exercises, the body scan takes practice, but the rewards are worth it. To conclude, I would like to note what T.S. Eliot said about mindfulness. He said, "A condition of complete simplicity, costing not less, than everything." Is changing your life, your body, your emotions, even you're spirit worth twenty minutes of your time? Honor yourself today and try a body scan, you won't be disappointed.

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