
Relaxation, Meditation and Visualization

Last Updated Friday, 14 November 2008

Overview

Yoga, transcendental meditation, Tai-Chi, Chi Kung or Qi Gong, guided visualization...a common thread among all of these techniques is the practice of mindful relaxation. Mindful relaxation (meditation) is characterized by:

- Slow, regular breathing; deep inhalation and exhalation
- Reduced heart rate, pulse and other physiological indications of stress
- A heightened sense of the present moment, free from thoughts of the past or thoughts of the future

Mindful relaxation can have a powerful impact on our ability to extend life or expand our appreciation and awareness of our life experience. The dilemma for cancer warriors (those with cancer or caring for someone who has it) is we are presented with many roadblocks to achieving this relaxed state just when we need it most.

First, the initial diagnosis of cancer increases our stress level. We wonder why we got the disease and we may become preoccupied with what is in store for us. Second, cancer treatments can be physically demanding. We anticipate the possibility of side effects. We may actually experience side effects during treatment and it is possible that the negative reaction is heightened due to elevated stress levels. Third, as we progress through our treatments we have many thoughts like "did I select the correct treatment strategy?" or "what is the next check-up going to show?"

Don't get me wrong. We should be spending some time thinking about the past as well as the future. A review and inventory of our past experiences can help us understand our current situation. Plans and goals for the future are also an important part of our response to cancer. When this type of thinking takes over however, it will create extreme stress. We need to release ourselves from these damaging thoughts. Mindful relaxation allows us to be aware of the present moment and combat the negative past and future thoughts that raise our stress levels.

Why Relax?

Quite simply, being relaxed feels good! Spend a minute or two on the following exercise. Close your eyes and think of a time when you were quite emotionally stressed and had difficulty extracting yourself from that feeling. Pick a situation when you weren't bothered by any physical ailments, you were just emotionally stressed. The memory will probably still create the same bad sensations in your body.

Now think of a time where you were very relaxed, not a care in the world. Visualize it in enough detail to bring back that

stress-free feeling. You can probably feel the good sensation in your body, too. Quite a difference, isn't it?

Sometimes we think we are relaxing when in fact we are experiencing significant stress responses. Examples are going to a sporting event where you really are caught up in the outcome, or going to a movie that scares you or keeps you on the edge of your seat. We seek out these situations because they "pump us up" or give us a thrill. These may be enjoyable pastimes, but are not true relaxation.

True relaxation is the absence of stress. Deepak Chopra¹ identifies three phases of stress: 1) the stressful event; 2) our inner appraisal of it; and 3) our body's reaction. The three phases may go by in an instant, so we often perceive them to be a single event. An example of this is the well-known "fight or flight response." Narrowly avoiding a car accident is a good example.

On the other hand, the actual stressful event may be a past memory or a future fear. Our inner appraisal of the event may preoccupy our minds, continuously replaying thoughts of past regrets or future fears. We have placed ourselves into a very unhealthy stress spiral. Mindful relaxation can help combat this spiral by bringing our awareness to the present moment.

The key to getting there is learning how to breathe.

Breathing 101

Eating, drinking and breathing are all required to sustain life. You can go without food for weeks, water for days, but without breath…only moments. So breathing is a vital activity that takes us from moment to moment. Breathing is also one of the least conscious life-sustaining activities that we do. Mindful breathing centers our awareness on this unconscious act. Centering your awareness on breathing automatically moves your mind to the present moment.

By the way, it is also good to become more mindful of eating, drinking and other parts of our lives that we have learned to do semi-consciously.

Beginning Technique

The following steps are documented in several books, tapes and articles on relaxation. They are very easy to follow, but none of them should be left out.

1. Find a quiet place, a place where you will not be disturbed for 10 - 20 minutes. Television, phones ringing, and loud noises are distractions. Some types of music are OK (see resources), so if necessary use headphones to block out the extraneous sounds.

2. Sit in a comfortable but straight-backed chair, or lie on your back on the floor. If you lie on the floor, use a blanket, beach towel or yoga mat. It is good to use the same surface each time, incorporating it as part of your "safe place." If you lie down, you may like a pillow or bolster under your knees to take pressure off the lower back.

3. Begin counting your breaths. Observe your breathing. Notice your next inhalation. Since inhales and exhales usually come in pairs, observe your following exhalation and count "1". With the next inhale/exhale pair Count "2" on exhalation. Continue this process. Basically just observe your breaths and count them.

4. I wish I could say that is all there is to it. As you continue to observe and count breaths, stray thoughts about the past, present and future will start showing up. Don't be angry with them. They are part of you. Tell them gently that you just don't want to spend time with them now and gently push them away in your mind. You can use a visual image like pushing them gently behind you like your swimming, clearing the path in front of you. Return to counting your breaths.

5. Once you become conscious of your breathing, step 4 is the most important step you are doing. Depending on your current state of mind, you may observe anywhere from 10 to 1000 stray thoughts. Don't get frustrated! Observe each one and gently push it away. If you lose count of your breaths, start over at "1." There are times when I completely lose track and I suspect that I am counting "1" over and over again. That is OK!

6. Continue for about 10 to 20 minutes. Music can be a good timer, but make sure you use the correct kind. You might want to set a timer, but make sure it isn't so loud that it jolts you out of your practice. Come out of the session slowly. Feel free to stretch, yawn, etc.

7. ALTERNATE BREATHING TECHNIQUE - CONTROLLED BREATHING: Instead of just observing your breaths, you may want to consciously participate in their action. Involve the abdominal muscles. Give yourself a "big belly" using a slow inhale, and fill yourself with air from the belly on up. Hold for a split second, and then empty everything out, belly area last. Inhales and exhales should be of equal length. You can get the idea of the length by mentally counting "in one", "in two", "in three" on inhale, then "out one", "out two", "out three" on exhale. You may want to extend the count to a "in/out four" if you can do it. Just remember the breaths are SLOW!

Dr. Weil's Yogic breathing technique

Dr. Andrew Weil, holistic practitioner and writer has featured a yogic breathing exercise on his website (<http://www.pathfinder.com/drweil/>). In his article "Natural Health, Natural Medicine, Online Relaxation", he states, "The single most effective relaxation technique I know is conscious regulation of breath".

- Sit up, with your back straight (eventually you'll be able to do this exercise in any position).

- Place your tongue against the ridge of tissue just behind your upper front teeth and keep it there throughout the exercise.
- Exhale completely through your mouth, making a whoosh sound.
- Close your mouth and inhale quietly through your nose to a mental count of four.
- Hold your breath for a count of seven.
- Exhale completely through your mouth, making a whoosh sound to a count of eight.
- Repeat this cycle three more times for a total of four breaths.
- Try to do this breathing exercise at least twice a day. You can repeat the whole sequence as often as you wish, but don't do more than four breaths at one time for the first month of practice. (This exercise is fairly intense and has a profound effect on the nervous system -- more is neither necessary nor better for you.) Full article:

<http://www.pathfinder.com/drweil/database/display/0,1412,100,00.html>

Bubbles Meditation

An alternative to breath counting meditation is a European technique called "Bubbles Meditation". For meditation to work properly, two things must occur: 1.) Slowing down the breath; 2.) Slowing down thoughts. By doing these two things, the mind can take a journey inward to calmness, healing and clearer thinking. To begin the practice of bubbles meditation, the following are important.

- 1.) Wear loose-fitting clothes that let you sit comfortably and unrestricted.
- 2.) Elongate your spine, neck and head upward.
- 3.) Keep your shoulders relaxed.
- 4.) Center your attention in the Hara or spiritual center of the body. This energy center is located approximately 2 inches below the navel.

The Practice

- Breathe deeply through the abdomen 3-4 times and visualize a calm pond in front of you.
- Visualize every aspect of the pond, the clear blue water, the lily pads, and the reeds waving in the breeze.
- Imagine that you are able to breathe very consciously and unrestricted under water.
- Walk into the water and find a comfortable place that you can sit under the water on the bottom of the pond.
- Your breathing is so much easier here. Relaxed and flowing.
- As you breathe, visualize bubbles arising from your breath that float to the surface.

- As you watch the bubbles float to the surface, place each thought that enters your mind in the bubbles that appear, one thought per bubble.
- Allow the bubble to float to the surface slowly until it reaches the surface, breaks open and floats away into the air.
- Every thought that arises must go into a bubble. Even if you are saying to yourself, " Why am I doing this?" "How will this help?" " I can't seem to imagine the bubbles." Etc. Each of those thoughts goes into a bubble.
- Once you have achieved placing each thought in a bubble so it can float away, begin to slow the rate of the bubbles' ascent to the surface by imagining that you are slowing them down. Watch them float and take the thoughts with them. Slow your breathing down to slow the speed of the bubbles. Keep doing this until you have one or two bubbles that contain no thoughts.
- This meditation should be practiced between 5-10 minutes.

The Art of Letting Go

Our minds are healthier and our bodies more willing to heal if we can let go of the clutter that goes on inside of our heads each day. As Jung told us, " Not only can you analyze your unconscious, but you can also let the unconscious analyze you." Sometimes instead of thinking and doing, it is best if we just get out of the way! Letting go, meditating, visualizing or any other technique that allows our body to heal does not mean forgetting our sadness or making it magically go away. In fact, it means inviting our sadness to sit with us and observe it for it's healing presence, but not own it as a symptom of our own self-destruction or potential lack of courage.

A legend in India tells us that there is a way of cutting a hole in a coconut to catch a monkey. The hunter will cut a hole in the coconut that is just big enough for the monkey to put its hand through. They will drill two smaller holes in the other end, pass a wire through, and secure the coconut to the base of a tree. After putting a banana in the coconut, the hunter will hide awaiting the monkey. The monkey puts his hand in and takes hold of the banana. The hole is large enough that the open hand can go in but the fist cannot get out. All the monkey has to do to be free is to let go of the banana. But it seems most monkeys do not let go.

In spite of our intelligence, our minds continue to be caught in two ways. We see things that are pleasant and want to grasp them and cling so they never change. In addition, we see things that are frightening, sad or painful and long for them to go away. The pushing and pulling going on in our minds making the painful experiences never go away and the pleasant experiences never grow and expand. In the process of letting go, no experience is romanticized or rejected. One allows all experiences to be as they are and observe them for the growth and potential they have brought to our lives. When we observe our minds grasping and pushing, it is important to remind ourselves to let go of those impulses on purpose. Look at the way one is holding onto thoughts and imagine what it would feel like to let go. Practice feeling what you feel just before you fall asleep. Falling asleep is like letting go. Your thoughts slow down and your muscles relax, you follow a path and surrender to whatever sleep has in store for you. Your pain and your joy are still present but a relaxed calm of surrendering to healing and new knowledge permeate your body.

Mindfulness Each Day

Thich Nhat Hanh² talks about using everyday activities to awaken the mindfulness within us. Some examples are:

- Eat mindfully. Eat in silence once in awhile. Pay attention to the smells, tastes, arm movements, use of fork, chewing, swallowing, etc.
- Walking meditation. While walking, time your breaths to your step. Maybe three steps for an inhale, three for and exhale. Maybe walk slower than normal. Notice everything around you.
- Wash dishes mindfully. Pay attention to every movement. Feel the water, the suds, the dish. Watch yourself place them in the dish drainer. Note: does not work if you have an automatic dishwasher!

The common element to all of these techniques is don't dwell on stray thoughts, just move them to the side and keep paying attention to the activity.

Adding Visualization

Once you have developed the ability to get mindful, you can add visualization exercises to create a powerful sense of well being. Dr. David Simon³ discusses the concepts of attention and intention: "Shifting our awareness from one object to another is the process of directing our attention… Whatever we place our attention on increases in importance in our life; when we remove our attention it diminishes in significance." "Intention is the process of directing attention for a specific purpose." Visualization taps the power of intention. Here is some visualization examples from Dr. Simon's book:

- Visualize your cancer cells as disorganized and confused (they are!) and your killer cells as strong and vigilant, able to find and "teach" the cancer cells that they are supposed to die like other normal cells.
- Directly prior to and during the administration of any chemotherapy or immunotherapy, visualize the chemical as "golden healing nectar" that will destroy the confused cells and strengthen the good cells.
- Visualize radiation as concentrated light beams which expose shadowy nests of renegade cells.

Use these visualizations in combination with your breathing exercises. Make your own up too. When I get my BCG treatment I mentally repeat " I welcome this medicine into my body so it can teach me to heal myself" and visualize my cells and immune system learning from the BCG.

There are many tapes and CD's available that will take you on intense visualization journeys. A few of these are listed in the resources section. Again, a good set of headphones really pays off.

Spiritual Connections

If the techniques described above are practiced regularly, you will feel less stress during a very stressful period in your life. Reducing stress has many physical benefits. But is there more to relaxation and meditation than making us feel better physically? This section explores that possibility.

All of the world's major religions have some kind of meditative component. Deepak Chopra discusses this theme in detail in *How to Know God*⁴. In general, when one clears the mind and reaches a meditative state, a direct spiritual experience may take place. As Thomas Moore states in *Meditations*⁵, "In the presence of nothing, the soul rejoices." The relaxed state brought about by meditation may evolve to a feeling of spiritual connectedness or unity - a "oneness" with the universe.

David Harp⁶ alludes to a "Meditator's worldview" of "we are all one." He says:

The important element of the Meditator's worldview is that we are each much more than a tiny, isolated mind/body. We are instead a tiny but important part of a collective consciousness, which includes all that has ever existed. We've just momentarily lost sight of this fact…

Gangaji⁷ talks about the Self and its revelation in the quiet mind.

The quiet mind reveals that which is always silent, that which both activity and inactivity spring from and return to, that which the experience of ignorance and the experience of enlightenment spring from and return to.

That is your own Self.

Finally, Kahlil Gibran (quoted by Deepak Chopra⁸) wrote this:

Yet the timeless in you is aware of life's timelessness
and knows that yesterday is but today's memory and tomorrow
is today's dream
and that which sings and contemplates in you
is still dwelling
within the bounds of that moment which scattered
The stars into space.

The benefits of mindful relaxation and meditation may go beyond the physical.

Conclusion

Mindful relaxation and meditation will bring you reduced stress, increased health and a connection with your inner spirit. Practice the techniques described here. If you like them, you may enjoy deepening your practice by reading, listening or viewing the resources listed in the next section.

What ever you do, try it!

Resources

Headphones

I recommend getting the kind that cover the ears completely to keep the sound out. I am using SONY Professional headphones, MDR-7506. These or a similar quality will really pay off.

CD's and Tapes

Brainwave Journey, Dr. Jeffery Thompson and Owen Morrison; The Relaxation Company. This is a set of four compact discs: Journey of the MIND, Journey of the BODY, Journey of the HEART, Journey of the SPIRIT. A variety of sounds are combined with spoken guided visualization to take you on these journeys.

Sounds of Peace, Nawang Kheehog; Sounds True. Nawang is a flutist and former Buddhist monk. He plays echoing and peaceful instrumental sounds.

Liquid Mind III: Balance, Liquid Mind; Chuck Wild Records. Instrumental music. Very uplifting and good to relax by.

If you get DirecTv, try the music channel called "Atmospheres."

Amazon.com and other music retailers will usually have this type of music under "New Age."

Videos

Videos are especially good if you want to mix your meditation with body movements. Living Arts, <http://www.livingarts.com/index.asp> has a good set of Yoga tapes. I am using A.M Yoga by Rodney Yee. They have several others from beginner to advanced. You may also want to find a Beginner's Tai Chi video tape. I have an old one that came from Hilton Head and was produced there locally.

Internet Links

Please use your own judgement when looking at these sites!

<http://www.chopra.com/> This esteemed M.D. and writer states that the purpose of his website is; "...dedicated to changing the prevailing worldview from one that views human beings as physical machines with thoughts to one that understands that we are conscious energy – Spirit – disguised as individuals."

<http://www.holisticmed.com/www/energy.html> Various energy healing approaches. Lots of links. I think some of the links are pretty controversial, so use your own good judgement.

<http://yogaclass.com/central.html> Good information on breathing and relaxation along with yoga.

<http://www.santosha.com/index.html> Another yoga site.

http://www.pathfinder.com/drweil/qa_answer/0,3189,1618,00.html Great link From Dr. Andrew Weil which talks about mindfulness. He has a couple of links and book suggestions on this page. Also type, in "meditation", "breathing" or "relaxation" at the search prompt and you will get more articles on these subjects.

<http://www.healthjourneys.com/bio.html> Health Journeys offers lots of different books, CD's and tapes on guided imagery. There are tons of good links from this site. Look under "Rings, Links and Awards."

Books

Books listed here are in addition to those mentioned in the article and listed as a reference. BOOK TIP: Books on tape are a good way to "read" while driving, but don't play the meditative sections when you are at the wheel!

The Seat of the Soul, Gary Zukav; Fireside. Zukav questions the Western model of the soul, alleging that the human species is in the midst of a great transformation, evolving from a species that pursues power based upon the perceptions of the five senses--"external power"--to one that pursues power based upon perceptions of the soul--"authentic power."

Visualization for Treating Cancer, Patrick Fanning; New Harbinger Publications. This is an audio tape I picked up at a used book store. Pretty good if you can find it. Published 1992.

The Four Levels of Healing, Shakti Gawain; Hay House. Another audio tape from the used book store! Published in 1996.

Love, Medicine & Miracles, Bernie S. Siegel; Harper & Row, 1990. Bernie Siegel discusses the power of the mind over the body.

References

1, 8 Ageless Body, Timeless Mind, Deepak Chopra; Harmony Books, 1993.

2 Peace is Every Step, Thich Nhat Hanh; Bantam Books, 1992.

3 Return to Wholeness, David Simon; John Wiley & Sons, 1998. Highly recommended!

4 How to Know God, Deepak Chopra; Harmony Books, 2000.

5 Meditations, Thomas Moore; Harper Audio, 1994.

6 The Three-Minute Meditator, David Harp; MJF Books, 1996.

7 You Are That!, Gangaji; Satsang Press, 1995.

Contributed by Bob Skevington and Denise Wehri