

Relax (or else!)

By Howard Woodwind Morningstar, M.D.

A man walking through the jungle sees a hungry tiger stalking him. He starts to run as fast as he can, and for awhile it seems that he's escaping. But then he comes to a sheer precipice dropping far below his feet, blocking his path. He stands on the brink, paralyzed with fear, certain that this is the end.

Just as the tiger is about to devour him he sees a vine hanging over the edge. With nothing to lose, he grabs hold of the vine and leaps into the void. Hanging on to the vine, he climbs down the cliff towards the jungle below. As he approaches the bottom it again seems that he's going to escape. But then another hungry tiger leaps up at him with open jaws. Terrified, he flees back up to a place midway between the two tigers.

As he clings to the vine he can hear the hungry tigers above and below pacing and growling, waiting for their meal. Still, he feels safe, because if he just stays where he is, they can't eat him. But when he sees a mouse chewing through the vine above his reach, he realizes that at any moment the vine may be cut and he'll be tossed down to the hungry tiger waiting below. He again starts shaking with fear.

As he trembles, he opens his eyes and sees that the vine he's clinging to is laden with ripe plums. So he reaches out, picks a plum, takes a sweet juicy bite and utters a heartfelt "ahhhh!" as he tastes the delicious fruit.

Like the man in this Buddhist parable, we are all poised between the tigers of birth and death, of perils past and perils yet to come. We all wish to be as he is in the moment when he learns to relax despite the peril, to enjoy the sweetness of life instead of worrying about the tigers. Yet we spend much of our precious time fleeing from real and imagined threats, stressed out, at times even paralyzed with fear.

How do we get caught up in this flight? And once we're caught, how do we escape, remembering to relax and enjoy each moment despite the tensions of daily life?

"Stress" itself is not a negative experience. Sometimes, stressful feelings are appropriate, as in the "fight or flight" adrenaline response when we face an acute danger. In fact, resolved stressful experiences are often powerful catalysts for personal growth.

But chronic, unresolved stress has devastating effects on individuals, communities and the entire planet that threaten every aspect of our health and well being.

We're all familiar with the driven "type A" person who is always striving to achieve more and more. These individuals, who rarely stop struggling, face greatly increased risks of crippling strokes, heart attacks and sudden cardiac death. Unresolved stress also impairs immune

function, which can lead to cancer, chronic infections and many autoimmune diseases. It's a major trigger of headaches and chronic pain syndromes. Stress also contributes to a wide variety of other medical illnesses, including asthma, arthritis, digestive imbalance and skin conditions.

Chronic stress also causes many mental and emotional problems. It's clear that our current epidemics of anxiety, insomnia, depression, substance abuse, eating disorders and mental illnesses have their roots in individuals' unresolved stress. Unresolved stress also drives and intensifies many of our social calamities, fueling cycles of spousal and child abuse as well as epidemics of violent crime, bigotry and war. This leads to endless cycles of increased stress, alienation, anxiety and more stress.

Sadly, it appears that the problem may be accelerating. In pre-industrial societies, people sleep an average of ten hours a night, but in the USA we're down to just seven. American workers now labor more hours than any other nation's, in an era that promised to be filled with leisure time.

Stress levels seem to be escalating, as we're over stimulated and numbed by a flood of often violent and upsetting images and information. Unable to stop and benefit from the simple nourishment of restful sleep, we turn to alcohol and sleeping pills for sedation without true relaxation and then back to stimulants like caffeine so we can get going in the morning.

So, **how do we learn to slow down and relax?** It's more than a simple decision; we often need to break out of old patterns that distort our experience of life and no longer serve us. As in all healing endeavors, learning to reduce stress and live a relaxed life requires uncovering the roots of the problem, and then restoring balance in your life.

Learn to recognize personal signs of stress. Clues include increased muscle tension, rapid, shallow breathing, a frequently racing mind and irritability. More obvious symptoms include panic attacks, chronic pain, anxiety, depression, insomnia and violent or reckless behavior.

Once you become familiar with the signs of stress, it's a good idea to focus on identifying and eliminating behaviors that contribute to the problem. You may decide to cut back on caffeine and junk foods, change your sleep habits, your work or even your personal relationships.

Begin practicing specific techniques that help you relax. As is often true, the simplest medicines may be the most powerful of all.

A good place to start is by learning how to stop. When you feel stressed, stop what you are doing and take ten slow, full, deep breaths. This not only helps you focus your attention, but also releases brain endorphins, chemicals that induce calmness and a feeling of well being.

Go outside and listen to the music of running water, the whisper of wind in the trees. Stop and touch the living earth with your hands or bare feet. When you're stressed, experience Mother

Nature's beauty; her song and her touch are extraordinarily healing.

When you feel separated from Gaia's energy flow it's easy to become isolated, lost in the illusion of your own separateness. Any spiritual path that restores awareness of your connection to the divine will help heal this.

Gratitude is great medicine, so focus on what you have, not on what you lack. Gain perspective by asking yourself: what are the real consequences of this stressful event? Slow down and let go of deadlines. When you're stressed because of time pressures, remember the mantra: No hurry, no worry .

Start meditating daily, claiming for yourself quiet, unstructured time to clear your mind and come to a full stop. Or, practice a weekly sabbatical day in which you stop doing and start being.

Find out which tools work best for you: Lavender aromatherapy baths, ecstatic dance, calming music, t'ai chi, aerobic exercise, drumming, chanting or traditional religious services. Try massage, reflexology or other body work modalities to free yourself from patterns of stress held within your body. Induce inner peace with simple and productive things you do with your hands such as gardening, basket weaving or knitting.

Many find that *performing acts of kindness and service that give energy back to others and to the earth are extraordinarily calming and healing*. Whatever you do to relax, be sure you're sleeping well and laughing often. As Shakespeare wrote "Sleep (is the) chief nourisher at life's feast". And laughter is truly the best medicine.

It's important to **eat a healthy diet that promotes balanced inner harmony**. Choose organically grown foods that nourish the nervous system, including whole grains, fresh fruits and vegetables, fish and vegetarian proteins such as nuts, seeds and legumes. Avoid simple, refined carbohydrates like white flour and sugars, as these can cause physiologic changes and nutritional deficiencies that greatly increase the experience of stress. Minimize caffeine, refined sugars, alcohol and artificial food additives, as these can increase brain levels of anxiety-provoking neurotransmitters.

It's best to use herbal medicines as part of a comprehensive healing approach, not simply to mask symptoms.

Tonic herbs such as Oatstraw (*Avena sativa*), Nettles (*Urtica dioeca*), Lemon Balm (*Melissa officinalis*), Borage (*Borago officinalis*) "for courage" and Ginseng (*Panax ginseng*) help optimize nervous system function and overall resilience. Antioxidant herbs such as Ginkgo (*Ginkgo biloba*) and Milk Thistle (*Silybum marianum*) as well as adaptogenic herbs such as Siberian Ginseng (*Eleutherococcus senticosus*) can help alleviate the systemic effects of stress. St. John's Wort (*Hypericum perforatum*) eases stress by increasing brain serotonin levels.

Sometimes, herbal “nervines” that help one relax are beneficial. These include Chamomile (*Matricaria chamomilla*), Peppermint (*Mentha piperita*), Skullcap (*Scutellaria laterifolia*), Passionflower (*Passiflora incarnata*), Valerian (*Valeriana officinalis*), Hops (*Humulus lupulus*) and Kava (*Piper methysticum*).

The **love and support of caring people** and opportunities to talk about your feelings are powerful tools for resolving inner conflicts. Naming and expressing your fears will often help you overcome them. Many benefit from keeping a journal or dream diary. Sometimes professional or pastoral counseling is necessary and helpful.

Our healing may require that we go within ourselves and uncover old hidden wounds that secretly feed our stress. This process can be painful- it may be more comfortable to stick with what’s familiar, even when it’s harmful. Stress often arises from our resistance to change; yet change in nature is inevitable.

Everything in nature has its place, ebbing and flowing at its own pace. We worry and create obstacles to inner peace when we become attached to specific outcomes that can’t be predicted. Embracing the mystery of life and letting go of illusions of control are profound keys to relaxation. We really don’t need to know how things are going to turn out later in order to enjoy this moment now.

We are blessed with so many effective tools and techniques for relieving stress . As we become more at ease, aware that we belong here on this beautiful planet, we come to see our place in Gaia’s vast web of life. As we work, play and love, we radiate our ease, calming our community around us. Communities at ease are kind and gentle places to live, and work together to form nations at ease. Nations at ease join together to form a just and peaceful human race, our best hope for planetary healing.

Let the beauty all around you draw you in, comfort you, a babe in Mother Nature’s loving arms.

This overview is presented for educational purposes only. Please consult a qualified health care professional for advice regarding any specific health condition.

This article originally appeared in ***Sentient Times***.

Howard W. Morningstar MD, herbalist and board-certified family physician, is a graduate of Yale University School of Medicine and the California School of Herbal Studies. He and his wife Sue Morningstar CNM, women’s health nurse practitioner, share a family medicine practice in Ashland, Oregon. They can be reached at (541) 482-2032.