

Prophylactic Measures Against Burnout:

Helping Supporters of Trauma Victims Relax and Stay Healthy

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PART 2:

Relaxation techniques related to the body and the breathing.

As we literally explained in the first part of these article (within the last issue of the Research Bulletin of CSD - Nr.140), everyone involved in the process of supporting Cambodians with severe mental health problems such as *Major Depression* or *Post-Traumatic-Stress-Disorder (PTSD)* is in danger getting a more or less severe burn out syndrome. Burnout is a chronic condition that happens when the body or mind can no longer cope with overwhelmingly high demands. The array of symptoms associated with burnout is extensive. It is a fact: Health care workers are often prone to burnout.

We continue with explaining some supportive approaches related to burnout prophylaxes and will introduce some simple but powerful techniques related to the body and the breathing.

3. Relaxation of the body:

- ◆ *Walking* around in a peaceful environment trying to find a healthy rhythm (every body has its own healthy rhythm of movements)
- ◆ *Body Meditations* like Tai Chi, Qigong, Yoga, Dance
- ◆ *Muscular relaxation:* These is a systematic technique for achieving a deep state of relaxation known as "Progressive Muscle Relaxation". This technique is especially helpful for people whose anxiety and anger is strongly associated with high muscle tension after stressful events. Other symptoms that respond well to Progressive Muscle Relaxation include tension headaches, backaches, tightness in the jaw, tightness around the eyes, muscle spasms, high blood pressure, and insomnia. Long-term effects of regular practice of this technique include, a decrease in generalized anxiety, a decrease in anticipatory anxiety

related to phobias, a reduction in the frequency and duration of panic attacks, improved concentration, an increased sense of control over moods, increased self-esteem, and increased spontaneity and creativity.

3.1. Progressive Muscle Relaxation Technique

Practice at least 20 minutes per day. Find a quiet location to practice where you won't be distracted. Practice at regular times. Practice on an empty stomach. Assume a comfortable position. (Your entire body, including your head, should be supported. Lying down or sitting in a reclining chair are two ways of supporting your body completely. When lying down, you may want to place a pillow beneath your knees for further support. Sitting up is preferable to lying down if you are feeling tired and sleepy. It's advantageous to experience the full depth of the relaxation response consciously without going to sleep).

Once you are comfortably supported in a quiet place, follow the detailed instructions below (your partner, a good friend or a counselor may read this instruction).

1. To begin, take three deep abdominal breaths, exhaling slowly each time. As you exhale, imagine that tension throughout your body begin to flow away.
2. Clench your fists. Hold for 7-10 seconds and then release for 15-20 seconds. *Use these same time intervals for all other muscle groups.*
3. Tighten your biceps by drawing your forearms up toward your shoulders and "making a muscle" with both arms. Hold ... and then relax.
4. Tighten your *triceps--the* muscles on the undersides of your upper arms--by extending your arms out straight and locking your elbows. Hold ... and then relax.
5. Tense the muscles in your forehead by raising your eyebrows as far as you can. Hold ... and then relax. Imagine your forehead muscles becoming smooth and limp as they relax.
6. Tense the muscles around your eyes by clenching your eyelids tightly shut. Hold...and then relax. Imagine sensations of deep relaxation spreading all around the eyes.

7. Tighten your jaws by opening your mouth so widely that you stretch the muscles around the hinges of your jaw. Hold ... and then relax. Let your lips part and allow your jaw to hang loose.
8. Tighten the muscles in the back of your neck by pulling your head way back, as if you were going to touch your head to your back (be gentle with this muscle group to avoid injury). Focus only on tensing the muscles in your neck. Hold ... and then relax. Since this area is often especially tight, it's good to do the tense-relax cycle twice.
9. Take a few deep breaths and tune in to the weight of your head sinking into whatever surface it is resting on.
10. Tighten your shoulders by raising them up as if you were going to touch your ears. Hold ... and then relax.
11. Tighten the muscles around your shoulder blades by pushing your shoulder blades back as if you were going to touch them together. Hold the tension in your shoulder blades ... and then relax. Since this area is often especially tense, you might repeat the tense-relax sequence twice.
12. Tighten the muscles of your chest by taking in a deep breath. Hold for up to 10 seconds ... and then release slowly. Imagine any excess tension in your chest flowing away with the exhalation.
13. Tighten your stomach muscles by sucking your stomach in. Hold ... and then release. Imagine a wave of relaxation spreading through your abdomen.
14. Tighten your lower back by arching it up. (You should omit this exercise if you have lower back pain.) Hold ... and then relax.
15. Tighten your buttocks by pulling them together. Hold ... and then relax. Imagine the muscles in your hips going loose and limp.
16. Squeeze the muscles in your thighs all the way down to your knees. You will probably

have to tighten your hips along with your thighs, since the thigh muscles attach at the pelvis. Hold ... and then relax. Feel your thigh muscles smoothing out and relaxing completely.

17. Tighten your calf muscles by-pulling your toes toward you (flex carefully to avoid cramps). Hold ... and then relax.

18. Tighten your feet by curling your toes downward. Hold ... and then relax.

19. Mentally scan your body for any residual tension. If a particular area remains tense, repeat one or two tense-relax cycles for that group of muscles.

20. Now imagine a wave of relaxation slowly spreading throughout your body, starting at your head and gradually penetrating every muscle group all the way down to your toes¹.

The entire progressive muscle relaxation sequence should take you 20-30 minutes the first time. With practice you may decrease the time needed to 15-20 minutes. You might want to record the above exercises on an audio cassette to expedite your early practice sessions.

3.2. Breathing techniques:

Breathing exercises are one of the most powerful things a person can do to regain inner calm after stress has been triggered. Breath is the most natural object of meditation and an easier focus for attention than thought. Fifteen minutes a day can achieve a significant reduction in stress-related symptoms. Breathing is one function that is controlled by both the voluntary and involuntary nervous system, forming a bridge between our inner and outer selves. There are a number of relaxation techniques that focus on breathing control. One, which helps people to fall asleep, involves focusing on the area below the navel. Sit or lie quietly, watching the breath as it goes in and out of your abdomen. Do this for five to ten minutes. If you find yourself being distracted by disturbing thoughts, rather than trying to stop them, try to move your attention back to your breath.

¹ www.hypnos.co.uk/hypnomag/jacobson.htm. Last visited on 26 February 2008

Sit or lie quietly, watching the breath as it goes in and out of your abdomen.

Inhale through your nose, exhale through your mouse.

Do this for five to ten minutes.

If you find yourself being distracted by disturbing thoughts, rather than trying to stop them, try to move your attention back to your breath.

Example of a basic breathing technique:

Instead of just observing one's breath within a meditation, attempt to consciously participate in the breathing action.

Find a safe place where nobody can disturb you. For this breathing exercise lying on the floor is actually best. Please try not to fall asleep though. Put your palms down on the floor by your sides. Your feet should be just a few inches apart. Now just lie still for a few seconds. Let your thoughts gradually quieten. Without any force at all let your breathing become deeper and more regular. Now feel the weight of your body on the floor. 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 should be SLOW.²

Instead of a résumé I would like to emphasize an advice to stay healthy in body and mind from Buddha himself, highlighted by Maha Ghosananda. Unspoken it implies the most important health-care-practices we mentioned in this article: concentration, meditation, praying, waking around and healthy breathing: “

² Witzel, Matthias (2005), Unpublished document.