

Article for Healthy Times October 2008 by Stephen Clasper, executive coach and co-founder of Shakti Healing Circle

Do you feel exhausted or worried? Do you have trouble sleeping even though you feel fatigued? When we're stressed or under time pressure to get everything done, our bodies produce adrenaline, cortisol and other stress hormones, usually much more than we need or can burn off. The result is burn out and even higher levels of stress.

So, what can you do to break this pattern? There are five simple things you can do that don't really need too much discipline to work.

Eat at regular intervals during the day. The best plan calls for three main meals plus a snack mid morning and mid afternoon. If you skip a meal your body's blood sugar level drops, putting stress on your adrenal glands. You will feel lightheaded, anxious and sluggish and your attention span will drop noticeably. Skipping breakfast is the worst thing you can do and, if you're trying to lose weight, counterproductive. In fact, several research studies have shown that absorbing most of your daily calories at the beginning of the day and gradually reducing your calorie intake with each meal is more likely to help you maintain or lose weight. So, it's best to eat a good, balanced breakfast.

Get enough good sleep. You need sleep to repair and renew your body's cells but most of us get far less sleep than we need and build up a sleep deficit over time. Recent research shows that, for most of us, sleeping for less than six hours on a regular basis will speed the rate at which we age as well as increase our risk of diabetes. Consider these ideas for getting more and better sleep:

- Avoid television just before bed as the stimulus to the brain keeps our mind active for sometime. This is especially the case if we watch the news before bed.
- Sleep in total darkness as any light hitting our eyes in the night will disrupt the circadian rhythm of our pineal gland and halt production of the melatonin and serotonin we need for our cells to regrow.
- Avoid snacks before bed, especially grains or sugars, as these change our blood sugar level and stimulate our sympathetic nervous system.
- Read non fiction before going to sleep instead of anything too stimulating.
- Write down whatever is worrying you so that you can tell yourself that it can now wait until morning so that you can approach sleep free of stressful thoughts.

Exercise. So much has been written about the advantages of regular exercise that it feels like nagging to bring it up again. We all know intuitively that exercise is good for us, yet only 8 percent of men and 3 percent of women do any regularly scheduled exercise. However, the benefit to our physical, emotional and mental wellbeing is so significant that exercise cries out for attention. Exercise will help you to

- Sleep better
- Maintain your weight
- Improve your resistance to infections
- Improve your self esteem
- Reduce stress

- Slow the ageing process
- Lower your risk of cancer, heart disease and diabetes

The research is so convincing and consistent that it makes sense to take at least some exercise, even if it means simply walking up a few flights of stairs at home or work every day. The ideal, of course, is a proper programme that gives you a balance of aerobic and strength training over the course of a week.

A well-structured exercise program helps your heart and blood vessels work only a fraction as hard as they have to if you are out of shape. A conditioned person will have a heart rate of about 60 beats per minute, while someone out of shape will experience a heart rate of 80 beats per minute or an additional 30,000 beats every day. Exercise also helps your brain work better and faster (35 milliseconds faster after exercise compared to not exercising).

Before starting, however, it's important to set some goals, other than simply to exercise. If you have a reason to exercise you are more likely to have a sense of accomplishment along the way and to enjoy the exercise and so stick to it. This will also help you to track your progress and choose the right type of exercise. For example, if you want to lose weight and improve your body shape, resistance training would be a better choice than cardiovascular exercise. Resistance training builds muscle and because muscle has the highest metabolic rate of all our tissues, the more muscle we have, the more calories we burn even when we're at rest.

Breathing. This gives us energy and also helps us relax, but generally our breathing tends to be too quick and shallow and when we're anxious it gets even faster, depleting our energy and upsetting our mental and emotional balance. The easiest way to train ourselves to breathe properly is to stand straight or lie down so that we can extend our diaphragm fully and then breathe in slowly to the count of three and out slowly to the count of six. Just 10 minutes of this will quiet the body, the mind and the emotions.

Meditation or quiet reflection. We cannot **not think** and throughout the day we're engaged in a mental chatter with ourselves whether we want this or not of judgments and plans that confuse us and increase our anxiety. The harder we try to keep our mind still, the more thoughts we seem to generate. Meditation is a technique that anyone can learn to use at any time and place to quiet the mind and clear the chatter for a few moments to take back control over our lives. Its many benefits include boosting the immune system, reducing pain, blood pressure and anxiety and increasing creativity, problem solving and the ability to handle stressful situations.

We tend to worry about having enough time to get things done, but to be really effective we should be focusing instead on managing our energy levels. Our physical energy is most important as it governs our emotional and mental energy and one of the best ways to ensure you always have enough energy to handle life is to build in time for recovery.