We can all try to relax!

The definition of health produced by the World Health Organisation in 1946 is: "a state of physical, mental and social well-being and not simply the absence of infirmity". Keith Tones, Reader in Health Education at Leeds University, says two of the most important things we can teach for mental health are relaxation techniques and how to deal with transitions in life.

In "Mind as Healer, Mind as Slayer" Kenneth R. Pelletier draws on American studies on the effects of lifestyle changes. It was found that four out of every five people who experience many dramatic changes in their lives can expect a major illness within the next two years. In a list of stresses, each allocated points, death of a spouse is top with 100 points.

This is the stress list:

How can counsellors help bereaved people or indeed themselves to relax?

Relaxation will not cure or change the problems, but it will help us to recognise when our bodies become tense and prevent the build up of lactic acid in our muscles, which creates fatigue. It can also help us to sleep better, lessen pain, avoid dependency on alcohol and drugs, prevent minor headaches and ailments and generally enable us to adapt more easily to our rapidly changing environment and the people we meet.

Here are a few techniques that have been successfully used by myself and others to relieve tension and could be passed on by counsellors to the bereaved.

1 Acute stress - emergency technique

a) STOP
b) Breath out,unclench teeth, drop shoulders,unclench fists.
c) Relax and breathe in slowly.
d) Move around more slowly.
e) Lower the voice and speak more slowly.
f) If possible think about or do something else e.g. go into the garden or another room.

2 General Relaxation

Sit in a comfortable chair with feet on the floor, slightly apart, bottom well back in the seat and hands loosely in your lap, one on top of the other. Close your eyes. Use a reclining or upright chair; one with armrests will be more comfortable.

a) Check right through your body starting with the top of your head.
b) Feel yourselves relaxing each part before you move on to the next. When you feel ready, open your eyes again. Have a good stretch.

1. Death of a spouse.....100
2. Divorce 73
3. Marital separation 65
4. Jail term 63
5. Death of a close family member..... 63
6. Personal injury or illness..... 53
7. Marriage..... 50
8. Fired at work..... 47
9. Marital reconciliation 45
10. Retirement 45
11. Change in health of family member... 44
12. Pregnancy..... 44
13. Sex difficulties 39
14. Gain of new arrival 39
15. Business readjustment 39
16. Change in financial state 38
17. Death of close friend 37
18. Change to different line of work..... 36
19. Change in number of arguments with spouse 35
20. A large mortgage or loan..... 31
21. Foreclosure of mortgage or loan..... 30
22. Change in responsibilities at work... 29
23. Son or daughter leaving home.....29
24. Trouble with in-laws 29
25. Outstanding personal achievement 28
26. Spouse begins or stops work 26
27. Begin or end school or college.....26
28. Change in living conditions.....25
29. A change in personal habits.....24
30. Trouble with the boss.....23
31. Change in work hours or conditions...20
32. Change in residence.....20
33. Change in school or college.....20
34. Change in recreation 19
35. Change in church activities 19
36. Change in social activities 18
37. A moderate mortgage or loan 17
38. Change in sleeping habits 16
39. Change in rate of family gatherings..15
40. Change in eating habits 15
41. Holiday 13
42. Christmas 12
43. Minor violations of the law.....11

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BARBARA WARD is a Health Education Officer and a CRUSE Counselling Co-ordinator in the London Borough of Hillingdon. Her particular interests are holistic health, caring for the carers and healing. She has recently completed the 'Relaxation for Living ' Course and is now in her second year of training with the Psychosynthesis and Educational Trust (a practical approach to personal growth and self-awareness, which includes relaxation and meditation and its techniques). She is also writing a book called 'A Layman's Guide to Understanding Loss and Bereavement', and working with CRUSE to produce a teaching pack on Death Education in schools.

Breathing 3

When we are tense we tend to breathe too quickly and shallowly. This exercise encourages us to breathe more deeply, and relaxes our abdominal muscles, where a lot of tension can be held.

a) Sit well back in the chair, as described in (2)
b) Put one hand on the **upper** part of your chest and feel your breathing slow down under it.
c)Put your other hand on top of your abdomen and feel yourself breathing into this hard.
d) When ready drop both hands gently into your lap.
e) When you feel ready, open your eyes and have a good stretch.

4 Relief of headaches or migraine - often caused by tension.

a) Follow instructions for relaxing in a chair (see 2)
b) Place hands loosely in lap one on top of the other.
c) Picture warmth moving VERY SLOWLY from your head, across your shoulders, down your arms, into your hands and then the tips of your finger and thumbs. tips.
d) Follow 3e

NB You may find these exercises difficult at first, BUT DON'T GIVE UP TOO EASILY. Remember it takes many years to build up tension, so it can take a long time to lose it.

Deep Relaxation 5

I regret there is no room in this article to include instructions for deep relaxtion but it can be found in Jane Madders' book and tape* which I strongly recommend.

Best of all, become aware of the things that make you tense and the changes in your body that happen.

Learn to take action to relieve tension before it becomes built in.

Remember, we can't stop things happening to us in our life but we can decide how we let them affect us. Contentment is not always a matter of getting what we want. It is also a matter of wanting what we have.

References

"Mind as Healer, Mind as Slayer", by Kenneth R. Pelletier, George Allen & Unwin, £5.95 p 1978.

Jane Madders cassette tape "Relax" Techniques of Relaxation for Migraine, Fatigue and General Tension £4.0 0. (including postage) Jane Madders' book "Stress and Relaxation" £3. 15p (including postage). Both available from The Midlands Migraine Association - Mrs. K. M. Hay, 5 Temple Rd., Dorridge, Solihull, West Midlands B98 8LE.

MOURNING THE LOSS OF A NEWBORN BABY

BY DR. GILLIAN FORREST

cant part to play in facilitating the mourning of parents after a stillbirth or early neonatal death Once the mother has been discharged home. the amount of support that surrounds her and her husband seems to make a further very important contribution to their recovery from the loss. Parents are very reticent about seeking outside help for themselves. tending to feel that this indicated that they could not cope alone. We were able to reach a number of parents who felt like this because we were offering help with practical issues such as registration and funeral arrangements.

We gathered a lot of evidence in this study that there is widespread ignorance and misconception about how to help bereaved people, and there clearly needs to be much more education of the general public about these matters.

Reference

"Support after Perinatal Death: A Study of Support and Counselling after Perinatal Bereavement" by G. C. Forrest, E. Standish and J. D. Baum, British Medical Journal, 1982, vol. 285, pp.1475-1479.

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MRS. SHIRLEY WILLIAMS, President of the Social Democratic Party, has accepted an invitation from the Cruse Council to become a Parliamentary patron of Cruse.