



Encyclopedia of Trauma: An Interdisciplinary Guide

Counterbalancing Stress

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Counterbalancing is a method of coping with stress by invoking a stress reduction strategy. In the video *When Helping Hurts*, therapist John Wilson states, "It's important to counterbalance the intensity of the work you do." In the video, his statement is addressed chiefly to those laypersons and professionals who provide care for traumatized populations and consequently may experience secondary traumatic stress reactions or compassion fatigue. However, Dr. Wilson's statement, when slightly modified, provides a framework for those who experience critical incidents, disasters, and other traumatic events: It's important to counterbalance the intensity of stressors in one's life, regardless of whether the source of the stress is primary (direct stress) or secondary (response to someone else's stressful experience).

To understand more deeply the concept of counterbalancing, it is useful to take a closer look at the stress response system and its two major elements: the sympathetic nervous system (fight or flight) and its counterpart, the parasympathetic nervous system (relaxation response). The natural questions arise: How does one counterbalance? What does one do to counterbalance? In this entry, the human stress response is discussed, followed by a sample of recommended methods for inducing the relaxation response.

Human Stress Response

Counterbalancing is an approach to stress management. The human body's response to stress does not differentiate between primary (one's own experience) or secondary (reaction to another's experience) stressors. The human stress response, in simple terms, is composed of two systems: the sympathetic nervous system, which responds to threatening stressors, and the parasympathetic nervous system, activated when the perceived threat is no longer present. In most situations, the human body naturally activates the relaxation response on its own. For example, Driver A runs a stop sign and crosses the path of Driver B, causing Driver B to quickly react by slamming on the car's brakes. Driver B's parasympathetic nervous system responds to the threat, and all senses are heightened in an effort to ensure survival. Most people who have experienced this can recall the bodily sensation of a racing heart and fast breathing that are key indicators of an activated stress reaction. When the threat has passed, the heart rate slows to its normal pace and a regular breathing rate returns, characteristics of the para-sympathetic system at work.

However, there are some circumstances under which the sympathetic nervous remains engaged: when stressors are continually present and there is no relief (cumulative stress) or when a one-time stressor is beyond the person's ability to cope with it. Under these circumstances, deliberate efforts to counterbalance the stress response are important.

Strategies for Inducing the Relaxation Response

Recognition that one is feeling stressed is the first step in taking control of the stress reaction. Very often a family member, friend, or colleague will say that they notice something different. This is a good cue for a person to take action to decrease the stress reaction. The relaxation response may be invoked by many means, several of which are discussed below, because of their effectiveness with some of the most common stress reactions. Regular practice of one or more of these strategies will help reduce stress reactions.

[Table 1](#) lists some common stress reactions and the strategies by which the relaxation response may be induced for those reactions. Two strategies, breath work and progressive relaxation, are found to be effective in reducing the stress signs listed.

Breath Work

When people are stressed, breathing may be shallow. A shift to deeper breathing (diaphragmatic breathing) is one of the easiest means by which the relaxation response may be induced. One may practice this strategy at any time, in any place to reduce stress reactions. Regular practice may begin to produce benefits within days.

Table 1 Strategies for Inducing Relaxation Response: Examples of Stress Reactions and Effective Reduction Strategies

<i>Stress Reaction</i>	<i>Strategies for Inducing Relaxation Response</i>			
	<i>Breath Work</i>	<i>Meditation</i>	<i>Progressive Relaxation</i>	<i>Visualization/ Guided Imagery</i>
Anxiety	X	X	X	X
Chronic pain	X	X	X	X
Depression	X	X	X	
Fatigue	X		X	
Headaches/migraine headaches	X	X	X	X
High blood pressure	X	X	X	
Insomnia	X		X	
Irritability	X	X	X	X
Muscle tension	X		X	X

Meditation

When a person is stressed, thoughts may race or concentration may be difficult. Meditation practice is simply focusing on one thing (e.g., affirmation, mantra, object, breath) for a specific period of time. At first, a person may find that the mind wanders, a deviation that is recognized as naturally occurring. Regular meditative practice increases the mind's capacity to stay focused for longer and longer periods of time.

Progressive Relaxation

People who are stressed may feel the aches and pains associated with tight muscles. The progressive relaxation technique, developed in 1929 by Dr. Edmund Jacobsen, focuses on the systematic tensing and releasing of major muscle groups. It may take 7 to 14 days of regular practice to achieve stress symptom relief.

Visualization/Guided Imagery

Most people visualize, for example, daydreaming about a good experience or desired outcome. Visualization and guided imagery are the purposeful use of the mind's capacity to focus on the five senses while imagining positive, healing images. Audio recordings (self-made or purchased) or music are examples of tools that may aid in deepening focus. A person may feel stress relief the first time this strategy is used, or it may take several weeks for benefits to be realized.

When counterbalancing is effective, the signs of stress decrease. If a person does not get relief, consultation with a physician and/or mental health clinician may be indicated.

Conclusion

Stress may be counterbalanced by deliberately inducing the relaxation response. Regular practice of one or more strategies will decrease the intensity of stress reactions and increase a sense of well-being.

- relaxation
- parasympathetic nervous system
- nervous system
- stressors
- sympathetic nervous system
- drivers
- human body

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See Also

- [Acute Stress Disorder](#)
- [Biological Effects of Physical and Psychological Trauma](#)
- [Brain and Trauma](#)
- [Compassion Fatigue](#)
- [Counseling and Education About Trauma](#)
- [Critical Incident Stress](#)
- [Cumulative Trauma](#)
- [Resilience](#)
- [Resilience Bolstering](#)
- [Secondary Traumatic Stress](#)
- [Traumatic Stress Responses](#)

Further Readings

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