

FORGIVENESS (WASHING OUR BRAIN) AS A PART OF OUR PERSONAL HYGIENE.

FORGIVENESS is not about religion, there are a multitude of scientific studies that prove the **FORGIVENESS** is a healthy habit worth practicing. **FORGIVENESS**, or “washing our brain”, is like washing our hands; it should be done several times a day. Mental or emotional cleanliness is not “free of bacteria”; at the same time that washing our hands do not turn them sterile enough to perform a surgery without gloves, forgiveness does not turn the brain “free of distraction”. The brain is an active organ that needs space, it needs “cleanliness”.

Since the very beginning of our lives our parents and teachers have shown us how important is to take a shower regularly, wash our hands before eating, and brush our teeth after meals and before going to bed. There is no doubt these basic hygiene practices decrease the possibility of infections and other diseases, and maintain our body healthier. Also, it has been taught to us that respecting others the way we would like them to respect us is the basis of good relationships. Even though most of us grow up respecting our fellow mortals, we become upset as soon as they do not respect us – the way we expect to be respected. We get even more upset when we request their respect and we do not receive it.

Situations where we find people not behaving up to our expectations can become a problem that may interfere with our physical and mental health. There is no question that our health suffers the moment we become disturbed. Many studies show that when we get upset, we immediately enter a “state of alert” or “acute stress”, our adrenaline levels go up and our serotonin levels go down. When adrenaline levels increase, our body shifts to this “state of alert” that contracts our neck muscles, dilates our pupils, increases our heart rate, and constricts blood vessels to deliver much more oxygen to the organs the body uses to fight or flight: heart, brain, skeletal muscles. The digestive organs and the immune system are not considered “priority organs” by a brain that is “regrouping” to fight or flight in order to save its life; therefore, their blood supply is compromised to certain degree.

Remember that the brain is equipped to survive. In order to survive it will even override our intentions to kill ourselves by simply stopping breathing. If we quit breathing intentionally, the brain will make us collapse before dying; the paradox is that the result of collapsing is surviving. The collapse may have dangerous consequences such as fracturing our skull and dying, but the brain fulfilled its primary instinct of survival. Therefore, even though the cost of survival can be great, the brain does not see this; the brain only seeks living as a desperate measure.

When we worry or get angry, we trigger the same survival mechanism in our brain. The brain enters a state of acute stress that eventually decreases or disappears once the stimulus disappears or becomes distant. For example, if we see a lion coming our way the brain tells us: “get the heck out of here!”, or “get a rifle and kill it quick!” Once one of these measures has been achieved, adrenaline goes gradually to normal levels, and serotonin goes up to a healthy level.

It is normal to get upset or worried. However, if we experience this more frequently and persistently; these repeated episodes of “acute stress” may turn into a “chronic state of stress” where the organs which do not benefit in the stress state, such as the **DIGESTIVE SYSTEM**, and the immune system among others, will suffer –and the organs that temporarily benefit from the blood supply redistribution will overwork and also suffer, such in the case of heart attacks due to overworking our body.

When we are upset, we demand punishment or restitution; when we are worried we demand security. Either of these demands is difficult to fulfill because they are frequently unreachable, unrealistic, beyond our capabilities. Consequently, they will not, unlike the lion example, provide our brain with enough information to decide about “fight or flight”. These are not very good news for our primal brain and only lead to confusion and a period of more prolonged stress. If these periods become more frequent and we do not do anything about them it is not difficult to guess the repercussions. The symptoms of patients in this situation include nervousness, fatigue, inability to sleep well, irritability, perfectionism, difficulty getting along with others, a feeling of not being understood by other humans, etcetera. Furthermore, these symptoms may make us vulnerable to unhealthy habits or “pacifiers” such as overeating, drinking alcohol in excess, etcetera.

When our brain has preoccupation (occupying ourselves with things that have not occurred yet), and or anger, it has “unnecessary files” that are “jamming” its computer. Computers have devices to “clean out” this useless information. Human beings do not have a “clean up” button or program like machines; instead, we were given the ability to cope using healthier habits such as taking deep breaths.

When we take a deep breath, adrenaline goes down and serotonin goes up. These are good news for our digestive and immune systems. These actions get us closer to our “normal state”. I hate the word “normal” because it is very subjective when we are referring to the issues we face in our daily living; therefore, please allow me to use it for the sake of convenience –I beg you not to get lost in the meaning of it, it was made and defined by humans, therefore it is “defective” and subject to evolve into a different definition.

Stomach and colon problems worsen when we are tense. Because patients with indigestion, gastritis, reflux disease, diarrhea, constipation, bloating, colitis, irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), overweight, smoking, overdrinking, etcetera get worse with stress, they will benefit from a stress management program. Stress management includes the practice of **FORGIVENESS**.

The dictionary defines **FORGIVENESS** as **“QUITTING BEING ANGRY ABOUT SOMETHING”**. FORGIVENESS is not about religion, there are a multitude of scientific studies that prove the FORGIVENESS is a healthy habit worth practicing. FORGIVENESS, or “washing our brain”, is like washing our hands; it should be done several times a day. Mental or emotional cleanliness is not “free of bacteria”; at the same time that washing our hands do not turn them sterile enough to perform a surgery without gloves, forgiveness does not turn the brain “free of distraction”. The brain is an active organ that needs space, it needs “cleanliness”. When we do not consciously seek freedom from our negative thoughts of resentment, we become prisoners of them. I heard once that “resentment is like drinking a poison hoping that the other person dies”

Why forgive those who do not deserve it? Well, forgiveness is something we do so we can cope with the negative thoughts that affect our daily living, such as anger, it is not something that will force us to approve or disapprove any given action.

How do we get to that state of FORGIVENESS? How can we forgive those who do not deserve to be forgiven? These are great questions! Many wise people have said that in life there are no answers, only questions. As a physician my job is lure my patients to get into healthier habits, not to tell them who they should forgive and who they should not. I am a son of humans who find himself in the same human boat as you. Many people have discovered ways to free themselves by telling to themselves regularly that it is better to forgive rather than to expect to be forgiven, to love rather than to expect to be loved, and to understand rather than to be understood. Sometimes **it is a good idea to “hide” from every human for five minutes and take deep breaths; if we cannot hide, we can take deep breaths while we are working, driving, etc., that is “in the middle of the storm”**.

We can try to reflect on the phrase “I set you free to be yourself, so I can be free to be myself!” There are so many ways as there are human beings; **the idea is to have a solution that can be available at ALL TIMES, should we wish to use it**.

Aristotle (384-322 BC) said that **a virtue could be acquired by repeating it long enough until it becomes a “second nature”**. A famous violinist said once “I have practice the violin several hours daily for many years and now people say I am a genius!” Perhaps expecting to become a genius about forgiveness is an outlandish goal, but the idea is that the sooner we start practicing, the sooner the results will be.

The idea is to eventually forgive the ones we do not want to forgive. Forgiveness is the job of the person who is entitled to retribution. I see FORGIVENESS a form of unconditional love; I cannot say I am a loving person until I become willing to love the people that I do not want to love. Sometimes I ask the patients who claim to loving or forgiving, do you love Osama Bin Laden? This is obviously a very touchy subject knowing that this individual is responsible of the death of many innocent people in September 11, 2001. It is normal to hate the actions of a person like Bin Laden; nevertheless, a prolonged anger can be deleterious to our wellbeing.

When we are not well it is much more difficult to lead by example. Through the years, people have told me: “Rafael, if you want others to forgive you, you have to forgive them first”, “Rafael, if you want your children to be relaxed, you have to relax first!” “If you want your children not to shout, you cannot shout”. I am guilty of pointing the finger to those who do not praise me, love me or forgive me; my fearful brain says that I should cover my “bootie” and blame. Well, as you see, I am far from perfect. Perhaps, the most important action I am learning is that I am becoming more aware that this is what I am doing and that **I am willing to be willing to forgive**.

Let us do this exercise. First, we can **make a list of all the people we will not forgive**. Second, we will separate the ones that we may be willing to eventually forgive from the ones that we will “never” forgive. Let us do it just for the fun of it, let us see how many people we are resentful to. Do not be afraid, list those alive as well as all those who are not in this human world anymore.

Perhaps, we could start forgiving small things. For example, we could forgive the cashier at the supermarket for being a bit slower from our expectations, or the driver who gets in front of us without using signal lights while we are heading to work, or the spouse who did not welcome us at home, or the spouse that got home irritated for who knows what, or the one who did not thank us for serving him/her a meal. Maybe we could forgive the bosses at work because they were jumpy and somewhat short with us, or the employee for not doing a job close to perfection, or the child that did not take a message right, or came home with low grades.

All of us, men and women, big shots and “little people”, wise and not so wise want to “win”. There is nothing wrong with “winning”, what might be wrong is our concept of the word “winning”, how we “win”. Winning many times implies “surrendering” our ego’s false ideas of success. None of us wants to appear weak to the other; but it is an impossibility that we, all, will be able to win and be gracious to each other. There is always going to be a loser and a winner; unless, we adopt a forgiving attitude and avoid fighting/retreating in order to take a deep breath and see the bigger picture: we are not fighting tigers! At least not most of the time!

I have heard many wise people say that our primary purpose in life is to position ourselves to be of maximum service to the world around us; these includes our loved ones as much as those who we do not care much about, too. The world includes our couple, our children, our neighbors, etc. This may be too much to ask for some of us when we are too wrapped in the turbulence of life; nevertheless many people have forgotten their problems while serving others unconditionally -without receiving any material reward.

If we “fail” to forgive those who want to forgive today, the sole fact of making a sincere effort to forgive is enough for us to take a double dose of SELF-FORGIVENESS. We may, perhaps, be tempted to think that we cannot forgive ourselves, that “only God (if you believe there is one), or the people we offended are the ones that forgive”. However, I invite you to think that if God forgives everything, this means that this Superior Power has forgiven you already, and the only thing that is left is forgiving us for not living up to our expectations. Let us be kind and loving to ourselves, so we can learn –or continue to be kind with those who rub us the “wrong” way.