

Week Five on The PATH

Finding Your Peace

Week Five of The PATH improves all the parts of your life that matter for your weight and health—besides the molecules you eat. We will emphasize relaxation, breathing, laughter, play, and sleep.

WHAT TO DO THIS WEEK

- Learn how to breathe
- Learn how to relax by conscious decision

WHAT TO KNOW THIS WEEK

- How the body responds to stress
- Why a stressful life leads to weight gain and health problems
- What you can do to take control of stress

RESOURCES

- Sleeping tips
- Breathing exercises

HOMEWORK

- Notice the effect of stress on your eating rate
- Begin practicing the relaxation exercises before each meal

JOURNALING

- Learning to live a life you love

The Body Language of Feelings

Psychologist Richard Petty of Ohio State University has shown that our feelings can be affected by our actions: even by shaking our heads. The researchers lied to 82 college students. They told them the study was to see if simple head movements would degrade the sound quality of a new set of stereo headphones.

Half were told to nod their heads up and down once every second, and the others were told to shake their heads back and forth once a second. A recording of a campus radio program was transmitted through the headphones, with an editorial.

The editorial was for an increase in tuition—a subject important to students. Half the participants heard reasonable arguments to increase tuition (lower class size, more individual attention, better scholastic performance leading to better jobs). The others heard lame reasons for why they should support the increase. “We told them we only had daffodils on the campus, and we needed the money so we could plant some tulips for variety,” Petty says.

Those who nodded yes were much more confident in their own convictions that the argument was absurd. But shaking their head “no” made them less sure of their own convictions and less likely to oppose the need for tulips. Nodding and shaking didn’t affect their judgments, just their self-confidence.

“There’s so much that goes on at the unconscious level,” Petty says. “Freud was right about that. He was wrong about a lot of the details, but he certainly was right in that there’s so much going on [in our brains] that we’re just not aware of.”

By the way, when Petty finally told the participants their convictions were influenced by simple head movements, they all had the same reaction: Ridiculous.

Relax

Stress produces cortisol, which:

- Increases and maintains blood glucose levels
- Increases breakdown of your muscle protein into amino acids (to make more glucose).
- Stimulates the accumulation of fat in the trunk and face
- Reduces tissue immune response to injury
- Inhibits antibody production by decreasing the number of lymphocytes
- Inhibits immune cell growth to effect ability to fight sickness
- Suppresses the inflammation response your body needs to repair tissues
- Suppresses secretion of pituitary hormones
- Influences neuronal development in the fetal and neonatal brain
- Influences behavior and cognitive function
- Stimulates gastric acid secretion, and may contribute to gastric reflux
- Inhibits normal bone formation
- Stimulates absorption of bone tissues
- Leads to water retention
- Decrease calcium absorption from the gut
- Steals calcium from the bones
- Increases sodium in the blood
- Decreases potassium

Associated Pathology:

Excess cortisol—Cushing's syndrome

Trouble Sleeping?

You must get a good nights rest. Each person has a different amount of sleep they require to feel refreshed, so we can't say that you should get 8 hours, only that you should get your baseline or better.

Sleep deprivation disrupts your body's normal ability to process and control weight-related hormones such as glucose, cortisol, and thyroid hormones. An imbalance encourages cells to store excess fat and lowers your body's fat burning ability. Lack of sleep may also make it harder to control cravings. But just three consecutive nights of full sleep will reverse this.

But what can you do? Here are some tips to help you sleep better and fall asleep faster!

Sleep only when sleepy If you can't fall asleep within 20 minutes, get up and do something until you feel sleepy. Sit quietly in the dark or read. Keep the lights dim when you're up.

Get up and go to bed the same time every day Even on weekends! When your sleep cycle has a regular rhythm, you will feel better.

Refrain from exercise before bedtime Regular exercise is recommended to help you sleep better, but the timing of the workout is important. Exercising in the morning or early afternoon will not interfere with sleep.

Develop sleep rituals Give your body cues that it's time to slow down and sleep. Listen to relaxing music, read something soothing for 15 minutes.

Only use your bed for sleeping Refrain from using your bed to watch TV, pay bills, do work or reading. So when you go to bed your body knows it is time to sleep.

Stay away from caffeine, nicotine, and alcohol at least 4–6 hours before bed Alcohol depresses REM sleep, fragmenting sleep.

Take a hot bath before bedtime A hot bath will raise your body temperature, but it is the drop in body temperature that can help leave you drowsy.

Make sure your bed and bedroom are quiet and comfortable Arrange your space to be peaceful, however you define that.

Use sunlight to set your biological clock When you get up in the morning, open the curtains to let in the sun. Sun on your face is best.

Sleep

Breathing Exercises

Breathing Your Body Away

Gently focus your attention on your feet and legs. Be aware of all the sensations in your feet and legs. Now, inhale a long, slow breath. As you do, breathe in all the sensations from your feet and legs. In your mind's eye, imagine that you are erasing this part of your body. Now, as you exhale, breathe out all those sensations. Once again, breathe in your feet and legs, exhale them from your body, so that in your mind you only see from your hips up.

With another long breath, breathe in all the parts of your body to your neck, and, as you exhale, breathe it away... Now, beginning with your fingers, breathe in your fingers, hands, wrists and arms, and exhale them away... Now, your neck and head... as you breathe in, imagine your neck and head being erased and, now, breathe them away.

Go back over the whole body in one breath, beginning with the feet. A long slow breath in, and as you do, erase any little parts that still remain. Now, a long slow breath out, as you exhale all the remaining parts. Sit quietly for a minute and enjoy feeling yourself relax deeper and deeper.

A Favorite Scene, Place or Person

Sitting quietly, recall the most relaxing thought you can. Perhaps it's a favorite place, a vacation spot or favorite retreat of some sort; or it might be a person or pet with whom you feel at peace, or some scene—a meadow, or whatever works for you. Take a few seconds to get that in mind... Now, see or imagine that in your mind. Be sure to feel those good feelings you have when you are in that place. Just let them take over your whole awareness... If your thoughts wander, just take them gently back to that peaceful, relaxing place.

Cool Air In, Warm Air Out

With your eyes closed, and while relaxing quietly, gently focus on the end of your nose. As you breathe in, feel the air coming in the tip of your nose. As you breathe out, feel the air coming out the tip of your nose... Notice that the air coming in is cooler than the air going out... Gently focus on the cool air coming in, and the warm air going out. As your attention wanders, just gently bring it back to the tip of your nose.

Focus on a Word

Pick some word with good associations for you—a word which you associate with relaxation, comfort, peace. It could be “calm” or “cool, peaceful, joy, free,” etc. Now, just let that word hold the center of your thoughts, gently bring it back to that word. After a while, perhaps your mind will drift to other gentling, restful thoughts. If so, just let it wander. When it does drift to stressful thoughts, move back to your original word.

Belly Breathing

When a baby breathes, her stomach will rise and fall while her chest barely moves. Yet when we breathe, we often only draw air into our chest. Chest breathing stimulates the “fight or flight” response, while belly breathing stimulates relaxation and calm. To practice, lay on your bed and put one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach. Practice breathing until you can feel your stomach move but not your chest. Once you have mastered this, you can do it while sitting at your desk, taking a test, on a date, etc. You will become more adept at relaxing on command, while awake, anywhere.

Breathe

Practice your calm by checking your breathing

During the course of your day check your breathing regularly. Get into the habit of monitoring your breathing in a variety of situations, such as: first thing in the morning upon waking, during and after being stuck in congested traffic, during a meal break, prior to an important meeting - perhaps with the boss, or a client, even after an argument with your spouse or partner. In fact, check your breathing at any time that you think you are stressed, or about to become stressed. You'll find that with practice you will soon learn that you can calm and relax yourself mentally and physically in less than 60 seconds.

You will, with regular checking, find out how different situations affect your breathing patterns. If you find that you are predominantly taking quick, shallow breaths, get yourself into the habit of breathing more slowly and deeply. This will have the effect of reducing the risk of hyperventilating.

During stressful situations, slow, deep belly breathing will also have the effect of calming you, and making you more composed. It will help with relaxation, and will also reduce those feelings of tension and helplessness. It will give you a much greater sense of control over your own emotions, your own body, your own mind.

Playing Practice

Waste some time Hard-working people rarely waste time on frivolous, fun-filled activities. Yet, "playtime" is an important part of being healthy and productive.

Pretending is reality Mentally practice being relaxed, and your body believes what the mind says. Do this by acting like a calm person acts, others see you as a calm person, and you'll be a calm person.

Worry when the time comes Most worries are future-based. They revolve around things that, in most cases, will never happen. Concentrate on the present and the future will take care of itself. Que Sera Sera.

Being sensual makes you focus outside of your head A bunch of grapes, a glass of water, a field of grass or a sky of clouds. All these things can lead to calm when you give them even momentary attention.

The past is past Be present to the moment. Learn from the past and plan for the future, but be present. The past and future do not exist. Only now exists. When you recognize this reality, you can let go of mental burdens.

Steal 30 seconds When you're tense, go anywhere quiet, take thirty seconds, and practice your belly breathing. It doesn't take long. They will be the most productive thirty seconds in your day.

Control only what you can control Be rigorous in differentiating between what is achievable and what is a waste of time. Then devote your energies only to those tasks you can achieve. Be willing to delegate! You can't do everything or be everything.

Plan your worries Put aside a certain amount of time each day—at the same time each day—which you devote to sorting through your worries. When the time is up, STOP WORRYING.

Know when to withdraw There comes a time in every struggle when determination serves no purpose and becomes an end unto itself. Knowing when to move on to the next issue is a skill possessed by many calm people.

Seriously Funny

Fascinating differences emerge between nations in terms of the jokes they find funny. People from The Republic of Ireland, the UK, Australia and New Zealand expressed a strong preference for jokes involving word plays, such as:

Patient: "Doctor, I've got a strawberry stuck up my bum."

Doctor: "I've got some cream for that."

Americans and Canadians much preferred gags where there was a sense of superiority—either because a person looked stupid, or was made to look stupid by another person:

Texan: "Where are you from?"

Harvard grad: "I come from a place where we do not end our sentences with prepositions."

Texan: "Okay—where are you from, jackass?"

Finally, many European countries, such as France, Denmark and Belgium, liked jokes that were somewhat surreal, such as:

An Alsatian went to a telegram office, took out a blank form and wrote:

"Woof. Woof. Woof. Woof. Woof. Woof. Woof. Woof. Woof."

The clerk examined the paper and politely told the dog: "There are only nine words here. You could send another 'Woof' for the same price."

"But," the dog replied, "That would make no sense at all."

These European countries also enjoyed jokes that involved making light of topics that often make us feel anxious, such as death, illness, and marriage. For example:

A patient says: "Doctor, last night I made a Freudian slip. I was having dinner with my mother-in-law and wanted to say: "Could you please pass the butter." But instead I said: "You silly cow, you have completely ruined my life."

Interestingly, Germany was the exception. Germans did not express a strong preference for any type of joke - this may well explain why they came first in funniness—they do not have any strong preferences and so tend to find a wide spectrum of jokes funny.

Dr Richard Wiseman commented, "These results are really interesting—it suggests that people from different parts of the world have fundamentally different senses of humor. Humor is vital to communication and the more we understand about how people's culture and background affect their sense of humor, the more we will be able to communicate effectively."

The Good-Humor Man, Health, and The Data

Stressed-out folks with a strong sense of humor become less depressed and anxious than those whose sense of humor is less well developed, according to a study by psychologists Herbert Lefcourt, Ph.D., of the University of Waterloo, and Rod Martin, Ph.D., now at the University of Western Ontario.

Researchers at West Chester University in Pennsylvania found that students who used humor as a coping mechanism were more likely to be in a positive mood.

In a study of depressed and suicidal senior citizens, the patients who recovered best were the ones who demonstrated a sense of humor, reports psychiatrist Joseph Richman, M.D., professor emeritus at Albert Einstein Medical Center in the Bronx, New York.

All of this makes sense in light of laughter's numerous physiological effects. "After you laugh, you go into a relaxed state," explains John Morreall, Ph.D., president of HUMORWORKS Seminars in Tampa, Florida. "Your blood pressure and heart rate drop below normal, so you feel profoundly relaxed. Laughter also indirectly stimulates endorphins, the brain's natural painkillers."

In addition to its biological effects, laughter may also improve our mood through social means. Telling a joke, particularly one that illuminates a shared experience or problem, increases our sense of "belonging and social cohesion," says Richman. He believes that by psychologically connecting us to others, laughter counteracts "feelings of alienation, a major factor in depression and suicide."

Some of laughter's other psychological effects are less obvious. For one thing, says Morreall, it helps us think more creatively. "Humor loosens up the mental gears. It encourages out-of-the-ordinary ways of looking at things."

Humor guru William Fry, M.D., professor emeritus of psychiatry at Stanford University, takes this idea one step further. "Creativity and humor are identical," he contends. "They both involve bringing together two items which do not have an obvious connection, and creating a relationship."

Finally, humor helps us contend with the unthinkable—our mortality. Lefcourt recently found that people's willingness to sign the organ donor consent on their driver's license rises with their tendency to laugh. "Very few people are ready to think, even for a moment, about death," he says. "But those who have a sense of humor are more able to cope with the idea."

Laugh

Laughter Lightens The Heart

Laughter, along with an active sense of humor, may help protect you against a heart attack, according to a new study by cardiologists at the University of Maryland Medical Center in Baltimore. The study is the first to indicate that laughter may help prevent heart disease. Researchers found that people with heart disease were 40% less likely to laugh in a variety of situations compared to people of the same age without heart disease.

“The old saying that ‘laughter is the best medicine,’ definitely appears to be true when it comes to protecting your heart,” says Michael Miller, M.D., F.A.C.C., director of the Center for Preventive Cardiology at the University of Maryland Medical Center. “We don’t know yet why laughing protects the heart, but we know that mental stress is associated with impairment of the endothelium, the protective barrier lining our blood vessels. This can cause a series of inflammatory reactions that lead to fat and cholesterol build-up in the coronary arteries and ultimately to a heart attack,” says Dr. Miller.

“The ability to laugh—either naturally or as learned behavior may have important implications in societies such as the U.S. where heart disease remains the number one killer,” says Dr. Miller. “Perhaps regular, hearty laughter should be added to the list of healthy lifestyles.” Dr. Miller says it may be possible to add laughter into our daily activities, just as we do with other heart-healthy activities, such as taking the stairs instead of the elevator.

“We could perhaps read something humorous or watch a funny video and try to find ways to take ourselves less seriously,” Dr. Miller says. “The recommendation for a healthy heart may one day be — exercise, eat right and laugh a few times a day.”

Homework

- Laugh out loud at least once each day
- Find time to play this week
- Love your life like you mean it
- Practice your breathing as a way to “clock out”
- See. Hear. Feel. Smell. Taste. Be present to the moment.
- Sleep well, and enough

Journal

Beginning of the week

- Arrange your room/schedule/life to get more sleep.
- Think of the different ways you can build play into your life. Be creative!
- List the areas in your life that are the most stress-producing. As if you were coaching someone else, what would you tell them?
- Write one page in your Journal about one of the following:
 - The tragic loss of laughter that happens when a child becomes an adult
 - The need to balance being appropriate with being silly
 - Are you in your head, or are you in the world?
 - Multitasking is the key to success and the key to stress. Where is this balance in your life?
 - Sleep is nothing, a waste of time. But it is everything, too, and you will die without it. Why is that?

End of the week

Describe the hardest and easiest parts of finding your peace