

Konrad Wiesendanger

ESM - Embodied Stress Management

Escape the Stress Trap with Agile Mindfulness

Acknowledgments

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Stress Management

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The exercises presented in this book and in the audio files are not overly demanding for physically and mentally healthy people. However, by no means whatsoever do they replace any medical or psychological support that may be required. The author and the publisher explicitly exclude any liability. You practice Embodied Stress Management (ESM) techniques at your own risk.

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Preface

Stress designates all reactions of an organism to specific external stimuli. Today, however, we define stress more in terms of emotional stress factors, such as the pressure of time, noise, or unpleasant contact with customers/co-workers/supervisors as well as pressure that arises from these experiences.

Stress leads to the release of hormones, such as adrenaline or cortisol. Any long-term overstimulation without an adequate regenerative compensation may lead to muscle tension, followed by back pain, overweight, high blood lipids, blood sugar level and blood pressure, which may lead to arteriosclerosis or even heart attacks and strokes. And psychological disorders, depression, and burnout have increased enormously in the past years.

The health report of the Federal Republic of Germany reports: As of 2012, 5% of all reported cases of illness and as much as 10 % of all days of sick leave were due to such psychological disorders. The economic damage is reported to amount to more than 200 billion Euros. Dealing with stress correctly can therefore distinctly increase the quality of an individual's life, considerably improve a company's productivity, and enormously increase the GDP as well as improve international competitiveness.

This book provides individual workers with strategies and very quick and specific tips for dealing with stress better and avoiding its fatal consequences. Businesses that make it possible for their employees to participate

in such programs will be rewarded with fewer sick leave days, more contented workers and therefore a better market position. I hope this book will be distributed widely, and I wish its users all the success in the world!

Dr. Volker Schmiedel, M.A.

Volker Schmiedel is the author of numerous health guides.
Contact: v.schmiedel@paramed.ch

Introduction

Not all types of stress are the same. Working as an architect in the 1980's and 1990's, I dealt with very different kinds of stress. Whenever I completed a bid for an architecture competition, it meant long days and nights at the drawing board, deadline pressure, and striving for perfection. I loved those times and the pressure. In everyday life, however, when supervising building projects, dealing with developers and companies, there was less of a challenge, yet I often felt burdened by stress. High expectations, little appreciation, scheduling conflicts, and disputes were the ingredients that diminished my enjoyment of this work.

**It is often the experience of stress that prevents
people from optimizing their wellbeing.**

In 1994 I discovered the Feldenkrais Method and quickly realized that it could improve my state of mind at work enormously. But I also discovered that the new world this method of perception and movement offered new opportunities to me. So, I attended a 4-year training program to become a Feldenkrais practitioner and opened my own Feldenkrais practice.

I remained interested in the corporate world and applied my knowledge of architecture and movement to ergonomics consulting. I noticed that although many complaints at the workplace are linked to posture and

office furniture, it is often the experience of stress that prevents people from optimizing their wellbeing. Stress stops people from reducing physical strain even in a well-designed workplace.

And that is exactly where I started. With Embodied Stress Management (ESM) I created a method that allows employees to observe themselves at their workplace at precisely the moment when they experience stress and to then restore access to their body's resources. That is why every exercise is accompanied by a micromove: a discreet, invisible movement that can be carried out anywhere and anytime and that can smooth the edge of any unpleasant experience of stress.

Who Needs ESM?

Statistics show that the number of people who suffer from stress keeps growing. It isn't really known if people's physical, emotional, and time-related stress has really increased all that much, or whether stress these days just keeps getting more publicity. The fact is, however, that more and more people consider stress to be a burden in their lives.

There are many books and guides that can help you to reduce stress. Relaxation courses are very popular. However, they usually require even more hours from your already full schedule – hours in which you are supposed to relax by means of meditation, autogenic training, or yoga. There is nothing wrong with that, and anyone who can make time for such exercises will certainly profit from them.

ESM is an exercise program that also requires additional effort for a while. But after you have completed this program, it won't demand any more of your time. You will be able to change your behavior *while* experiencing stress, thus improving your well-being.

ESM has two objectives:

- You can recognize how much effort you need for your actions. In which situations do you stop breathing? When do your muscles tense up? Are these activities necessary at this very moment or are there alternatives?

- You can perform your actions more satisfactorily, with more elegance and less physical strain. You can discover more options for action, freeing yourself from the control of others.

Since the human body is the sensor as well as the motor of our existence, the solution will be found in your own body. Usually, however, the human body is defined by its performance. It has to become stronger, lose weight or measure up to some ideal of beauty. These demands then lead to more stress and keep you from seeing the things that are really happening inside your body.

ESM accepts you just the way you are! ESM does not require you to implement anyone else's expert knowledge.

ESM accepts you just the way you are! ESM does not require you to implement anyone else's expert knowledge. ESM accompanies your perception in a playful way. ESM asks many questions only you can answer. These questions serve to train your perception of your own body. ESM assumes that your perception is perfect at any given time, that, however, you can enhance and further develop this perfect perception even more. Whether you are young or old, an athlete or a couch potato, physically fit or challenged by physical limitations: You are able to develop your perception, create new options for action and train your body intelligence with ESM.

By sensing and using your body through new perspectives, you will take yourself seriously in any given situation, even when stressed. You'll be able to look after yourself, and you'll have a loving relationship with yourself.

Stress is a Part of Life

It is not stress in itself that puts us under strain and makes us ill. It is the amount and duration of stress. Stress arises from lack of time, in complex situations, when we experience fear or when we deal with conflicts.

In most cases, however, we are stimulated by stress. We can mobilize our power and access our reserves. A happy reunion, a fun tournament on the soccer field, a concert we have practiced many hours for or an exciting movie: These and many other happy moments in life create stress which is felt as something pleasant. If, however, stress exceeds a certain level, persists for a longer period of time, and especially if the experience is contrary to our own desires, our reserves are used up quickly, and we start to suffer.

In most cases we are stimulated by stress.

Productivity in the working world keeps increasing every year. Companies reduce their human resources. In many positions there is no “second-in-command” anymore; there is no one who can do your work for you if you are unable to come to work. In order to find the time for your vacation, you have to do your work ahead of time and then find a huge pile of work waiting for you upon your return. Though this is not what vacations are for, it is a fact of life in most jobs. Many employees simply can no longer take the time to completely replenish their supply of energy.

However, the way human beings handle their supply of energy differs greatly. Some use their energy efficiently and economically. They seek recuperation even before their reservoirs are empty. Others waste their energy and strength. They believe they are only good enough if they give all they have to give. They consider leisure time to be a waste of time and tend to fill it with restlessness and great body tension.

If your constant availability at the job is paired with the feeling of never getting everything done, this stress becomes dangerous.

Many people believe that stress is mandatory. In some business fields, just admitting that you have enough time at your job triggers the fear that your position will soon be considered unnecessary and will be eliminated. So, you would rather emphasize everything that still has to be done. You state that you can't really afford to take time off and you can be reached at your job even after hours. In theory there is nothing wrong with mingling work and leisure time – as long as you consider it helpful. Yet if your constant availability at the job is paired with the feeling of never getting everything done, this stress becomes dangerous.

Stress management is not the same thing as time management. It is not primarily about achieving more in the same amount of time. Instead, it is about achieving what is necessary with less stress. Stress management is about the ability to have a sense of your own supply of energy

at any given moment and to distribute burdens as much as possible in a way that allows for phases of recuperation.

Embodied Stress Management uses the resource that is always available to us: our body. The human body is both a sensor *and* a motor. Its versatile structure allows that each activity can be carried out in nearly countless ways. Some of these possible courses of action require less effort, while others require more. Any good stress management therefore consists of the ability to sense stress early on and react to it with an energy efficient choice of action.

That sounds easier than it really is. The way we were raised, and our habits frequently keep us from developing more useful solutions. Yet our body can provide answers to many questions – if we listen to it.

This book consists of two parts: In the first part you will learn more about the way stress and the physical experiences related to it are linked together. Then, to put these theories into practice, you will find a nine-week training program during which you can practice gentle physical exercises to train your sensitivity and develop the necessary freedom of action you need to handle stress effectively.

Taking a Look at Stress

Stress – another word for “strain”, is a neutral term per se. All human beings are in a constant process of recovering their equilibrium, their inner balance. Even when we are not confronted with any external problems, stress will occur. We get hungry, thirsty, need fresh air and social contacts. When a need rises up above the level of perception, we start to do something. We eat something, open the window, call someone. When we cannot do anything for whatever reason, we feel the pressure rising. Then we experience stress.

It is easy to suppress the signals of stress for a long period of time.

It is not always easy to notice stress. But it *is* easy to suppress the signals of stress for a long period of time. These symptoms are often vague and will differ from one person to another. While some react with upset emotions, others may react with dry, itchy skin or sleep disorders. Even increasing impatience can be a sign of stress: Waiting in a traffic jam or in the line at the cash register of the supermarket becomes unbearable. A quiet hour on a Sunday morning leads to a tingling sensation or even tachycardia. “Empty” moments can no longer be used for regeneration.

Most of our behavior patterns are learned and shaped by the culture we grew up in. The influence of our culture, the way we were raised, and personal traumatic

experiences may lead to disorders. When we experience a discrepancy between reality and our idea of how it *should* be, we automatically try to enforce our idea by applying pressure. While doing this, we put strain on our body. We could also react by changing our behavior, but that often doesn't enter our mind, or we feel that we can't do that.

The strategy of reacting with pressure to situations indicates a narrowed field of vision. We react with tunnel vision. We only see this one way of doing things with the only alternative being failure. In these situations, we lose our orientation; we can no longer see what is important and what is urgent. In addition, we make it harder on ourselves to access our vital resources, with breathing as our oxygen supplier or with the ground as the foundation of all our activities. We lose access to helpful coping strategies; we no longer know where they are.

Even though stress is described as mental strain, it expresses itself physically. Tense muscles, painful joints, headaches, and pain in the digestive system accompany the unpleasant thoughts and emotions that come with stress.

So, if we are able to use our resources by sensing differences in the way we perceive our body, we will find a specific and safe way of dealing with stress and its aftereffects.

Find out for yourself

Sit comfortably on a chair and focus on every spot where your body touches a surface: Your feet touch the ground, your buttocks, and the back of your thighs rest on the surface of the seat, your back touches the back of your chair, and your hands can rest on your thighs. How do you experience your weight in these places?

Now focus on your breath for a while. How does the air flow into your body? At which moment do you start to exhale?

And now recall a stressful situation – be it when you were stopped in your car by a police officer or when you realized that you had lost your set of keys.

How aware were you of your body's weight and your breath at that time?

The Physiology of Stress

Stress affects the human being as a whole. Any experience of stress triggers a cascade of neurological, hormonal, and muscular reactions. From an evolutionary perspective, the usefulness of the body's reaction to stress is that it triggers a fast reaction to immediate impending danger. If there is danger, the vegetative nervous system reacts, stress hormones, such as adrenaline, noradrenaline and cortisol are released, and the body is prepared for flight or fight within mere seconds: Growing amounts of energy sources, such as glucose and fats, are released into the bloodstream, the blood supply to the muscles is increased while that to the inner organs and the cerebrum is reduced, as is the perception of pain.

The usefulness of the body's reaction to stress is that it triggers a fast reaction to immediate impending danger.

In our daily lives, however, we rarely face such immediate dangers. Yet the sense of not being good enough at work, the fear of losing your job, conflicts, or excessive perfectionism trigger the very same physiological reaction. This reaction is not as strong, but it lasts longer – in some circumstances even years. The nutrients released into the bloodstream however, don't get broken down during hard physical activity and therefore become a burden for the body. That is why latent stress is often part of the cause of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and