

BEING CALM

A TEN POINT PLAN FOR STRESS FREE LIVING

by Craig Brown



All too often in our society people work long stressful hours without giving themselves time to eat and relax. I find that every day in my general practitioner's surgery, illnesses such as duodenal ulcer and angina and symptoms of headache and depression are often caused by such stress. I usually ask my patients to give a description of a typical working day and week. An example would be a businessman getting up at 5.30 in the morning to drive to the city to get into work before the rush hour, and then working all day without a break. He usually arrives home after 8.00 at night, has a quick supper and collapses in front of the television exhausted. He also tends to take work home at the weekend to catch up and will rarely take a holiday.

I ask such individuals why they do this, and strangely enough they have often forgotten. At some time they needed to meet a deadline and never stopped, or they wanted to make a good impression with the boss, or they feared losing their job and being unable to pay their mortgage. More often than not, they actually had not given themselves time to sit down and think through their own problems. Such people are often very good at sorting out others problems, but not their own. Doctors and nurses are good examples.

The first thing I do as a doctor, when people come to the surgery with stress-

The Lesson

One thing I did learn as a houseman was from the physician I worked under. When he saw patients after they had made the initial recovery from a heart attack, he would ask them to make a list of all the things they enjoyed doing and all the things they disliked. When he returned to visit them before they were discharged he would ask for their lists. He would tear up the lists of their dislikes, and hand back the lists of what they enjoyed - with his advice to go and do them.

He was a wise man because the underlying truth is my third principle. We will only become healthy if we ourselves are willing to change.

Working in South Africa

After my year as a junior houseman, I did a further three years training for general practice in Dumfries and then went to work in a mission hospital in South Africa in the Zulu homelands for two years. The hospital and work was typical of a third world country. There were three doctors to look after a large three hundred and fifty bedded hospital. The main causes of illness were poverty and malnutrition. All the children were malnourished and the

induced illnesses, is to give them a medical sickness certificate for however long I feel they need to go home and rest. They often need up to six weeks. I ask them to come and see me again when they feel better. Then I ask, "What do you think brought on your illness?" so that they might look at their stresses in life and consider what to do about them.

So my first rule to calm down is to make time for oneself.

My second would be to see illnesses not as interruptions and problems but as lessons and opportunities.

mortality rate was high. But one of my lasting impressions was of how generally the people were happy. They were open and friendly, and would wave as we drove past their houses. The nurses, despite the discrimination of apartheid, were always cheerful and ready to share a joke.

Which brings me to my fourth observation: being calm is not dependent upon material wealth, but is a spiritual quality.

I remember particularly the Zulu way of saying farewell. "Hamba gauchlie" is said to the one who is leaving, and the one who is leaving replies "Sala gauchlie". Literally this means, "Go slowly" and "Stay slowly". It can also mean health, so it implies "Go healthily" and "Stay healthy". The further implication is if you go slowly, you will be healthy. It is a reminder to be mindful of the present, and to live in the present.

I think this makes a good fifth principle to live by - being mindful.

Littlehampton

Returning to this country, I joined a general practice in the south of England in Littlehampton. The practice had problems. The senior partner was a

workaholic. He liked to take on more and more patients and more commitments. In addition to our normal general practice work, we were each doing fifteen hours a week medical work. There was no structured management of staff or finances. What had started as a one-man practice in the front dining room was now six partners with a staff of fifteen. It was chaos. Bringing about change was slow, but tragedy struck when one of our partners died at the age of thirty-eight. We all knew in our hearts this was due to stress and exhaustion. It was the jolt we needed. We cut out our extra commitments and limited the number of our practice to 12,000 and to a fixed area. We appointed a practice manager to organise the staff and us. Reducing stress is not only a spiritual ideal, but it has to be practical. We had to plan and organise how to at least shine a light of calm on the chaos.

And so my sixth principle is to plan and organise.

Westcourt

As a group of doctors we now realised that to practise as we wished we would have to move from our two over-crowded surgeries and build a new centre. As fate would have it, I ruptured my Achilles tendon, and spent six weeks in bed. It gave me the chance to think about how we wanted to practise for the, rest of our medical careers. Together we framed a plan and, after much work and discussion, created a building that reflected how we wished to work. It is a building both homely and welcoming; at the same time it reflects quiet efficiency. In every aspect we try to build an atmosphere of a healthy environment, using plants and good lighting, and making it comfortable for the staff.

The seventh principle of calming down is to create a vision of how we would like our world to be, then working in co-operation with others towards it.

Today, the team comprises six doctors, three practice nurses, one social worker, two health visitors, ten receptionists, three administrators and three district nurses. And one has constantly to work at communication between members of the team. We always have a Christmas party and a summer outing. Small gestures, birthday cards and flowers when someone is sick, are important. Last year, with the introduction of the new contract for general practice, we all felt we had worked very hard so we gave ourselves, and the staff, an extra week's holiday.

There are many stresses in life we cannot avoid and a doctor's surgery proves no exception. But feeling part of a supportive team makes everything easier.

The eighth principle is, then, working together, considering others, and helping others. In a word: service.

Stress Clinics

Having our own centre meant we could begin to practise as we wished, and I began to organise stress-reduction clinics. Firstly we targeted tranquilliser users, then sleeping tablet users and then opened the groups to anyone. We would talk and counsel within the group and teach various relaxation techniques, exercises, breathing routines, visualisation and meditation. The latest group is for 14 - 17 year olds to help them with exam stress. This is run by a yoga teacher friend of mine. At the end of six weekly sessions we ask the students what they enjoyed most and found helpful. The verdict usually is meditation. In fact, our adult stress group classes are now 80%

in meditation, but we don't call it that in the south of England.

The ninth principle to cope with stress is meditation.

Healing

Something else I have been interested in is spiritual healing, and for the last six years a healer has been attending one of my clinics each week. The focus of our working together is to look at the spiritual context of the consultation. We start the therapy with a simple meditation of connecting our inner source to the supreme source and bringing down the light through ourselves into the consulting room. We finish the therapy with a closing meditation and sending the same healing light to our patients who attended.

Two main lessons I have learnt from this experience are:

1) Healers see themselves as channels for the energy of God's love. When we deal with sick people they tend to drain us and this is what is known in the medical profession as 'burn out'. But by first thinking on and then creating the reality of this energy of love - which is inexhaustible - it gives us more energy and vitality.

2) The doctor/healer is himself the most potent remedial treatment; his or her own state of being is a major influence on the outcome of a doctor/patient consultation. So the onus for all therapists is to calm down ourselves and to try and reach a sense of peace that will heal (not necessarily cure) our patients.

My final and tenth principle - using the energy of love.

Dr Craig Brown is a General Practitioner in Littlehampton in Sussex

So in short, the ten rules or principles:

- 1 *Make time for yourself***
- 2 *See illness is an opportunity***
- 3 *Be willing to change***
- 4 *Happiness is not dependent upon material wealth, but spiritual quality***
- 5 *Cultivate mindfulness***
- 6 *Plan and organize***
- 7 *Create a vision and co-operate with others to achieve it***
- 8 *Be of service to others***
- 9 *Practise meditation***
- 10 *Work with love***

