

# TOOLS/PRACTICES FOR HEALTHY IMMUNE FUNCTIONING

In this ongoing pandemic and upheaval, we all know the practical steps to take to stay as healthy as possible i.e., frequent hand washing, social distancing etc... However, it is equally important to bring our tools/practices to bear to create an inner environment of health. The inherent negativity bias of the brain combined with all of the unknowns in this situation create the “perfect storm” for anxiety to hijack us into a VERY high level of stress which produces a constant cascade of stress hormones coursing through our bodies. To the extent that our stress response is elevated, our immune system is compromised and depleted. Conversely, as we downregulate the stress response, the cascade of healthiest hormones is released and our immune system is strengthened. When we are hijacked by anxiety, we are in reactive mode and we forget what we already KNOW, what can help us, how to calm and de-stress ourselves so we CAN make appropriate decisions and deal with the continuing challenges in our lives in the best possible ways.

There are MANY practices that are VERY effective. I am going to focus on just a few and these will be the ones that I personally practice the most, find most helpful, and have consistently presented at my retreats, workshops, and in my private practice. Hopefully, for most of you, these will simply be reminders of what you DO already know.

There are TWO categories that I will address: 1) tools to downregulate the stress reaction i.e., calm and soothe the anxious parts of ourselves and 2) tools to strengthen the immune system. It is well documented that cultivating gratitude and wonder/awe are THE healthiest ways of enhancing our overall central nervous system functioning and thus strengthening our immune system----yes, even, and especially, in the midst of an ongoing crisis. As we know from the field of neuroscience, short practices done frequently shift our whole neurophysiology which shifts our emotions, and allows us to reconnect with our best inner resources. Therefore, all of the tools I am reviewing with you are SHORT and need to be practiced SEVERAL times throughout the day.

1. **BASIC BREATHWORK.** Whether or not you have a regular meditation practice, PLEASE know that all it takes is about 4-5 DEEP breaths to interrupt a train of anxiety. Several times a day, STOP, take a few conscious SLOW “belly breaths” with the outbreath about twice as long as the in-breath. If it helps, count to 3 on the in-breath and 6 on the outbreath or 4 and 8. OR feel your feet on the ground/floor and simply feel the slow breathing as you pay attention to the long out-breaths. The long exhalations signal to the brain that IN THIS MOMENT there is no danger which immediately takes us out of the anxiety driven stress reaction. Take one to three minutes to BREATHE in this conscious manner several times a day. When you finish even a one-minute practice, I suggest you end with a cognitive truth ex., “In this moment I AM ok” or “The Spirit is with me NOW” or another present moment truth that is right for you. The more you do this, you will become more aware of when you start to “spin out” into anxiety and be able to short circuit the hijacking!

2. **SIMPLE TOUCH** calms the Central Nervous System. One of Tara Brach's favorite practices to soothe ourselves when we are experiencing emotional distress is to place one hand over the heart, breathe deeply, and repeatedly say, "It's OK, Sweetie, I'm here" in the exact same way we would speak to a frightened child. Fear/anxiety triggers the youngest parts of ourselves so, in essence, we ARE soothing a scared, vulnerable inner child. It works! Then we are able to regroup, come back into our Adult Self and proceed.
3. **TAKING IN THE GOOD.** While #1 and #2 calm the Central Nervous System stopping the cascade of stress hormones in the body, this practice taught extensively by Rick Hanson consciously strengthens the immune system. It's easy, fun, and only takes 20 seconds or so. Please remember, SHORT PRACTICES DONE FREQUENTLY are the game-changers!!!! Basically there are three steps to this practice. 1) **STOP** and notice either something positive in THIS moment (the smaller the better ex., the sun shining, a squirrel at the feeder, a bud on a tree, the blue sky etc...) or remember a moment of either beauty or of something that touched you. 2) **SAVOR** the experience, that is, let your attention stay with it for about 20 seconds. 3) As you savor it, let it **SINK** into you. There are any number of ways to do that: open your body and just breathe deeply; imagine your heart is smiling or that you are a flower absorbing the light from the sun; sense a warm light filling your body from the top down. Use your imagination. The important thing is to keep your focus for about 20 seconds and have the experience in your body via deep breaths or imagery. This resets our neurophysiology.
4. **STOP/LOOK/GO.** This is similar to #3 and is Brother David Steindl-Rast's life work. As with #3 just STOP, then pay attention (come into your senses: what do I see? hear? smell? the feel of the air on my skin). Stay with the experience, again, for about 20 seconds and then GO back into wherever you were. Both #3 and #4 totally interrupt the runaway anxiety habits and build and strengthen new neural pathways that produce resilience, gratitude and joy.
5. **Look for the "WOW MOMENTS".** Little moments of wonder and awe are constantly available to us. When we are in stress mode, we do not see, experience or benefit from them. This really is one of my favorites----probably because I made it up prior to a retreat I gave on gratitude! As with the last two tools, we have to consciously STOP and PAY ATTENTION i.e., be PRESENT. INTEND to see the WOW of this particular moment and then just breathe it in for those 20 seconds. It also helps to speak it, so share it with someone!!! Often my husband and I will share our WOW MOMENTS from the day.
6. **ANY PRACTICE OF GRATITUDE** shifts our physiology into a healthier function. Whether it is a gratitude journal, an active practice of saying THANK YOU (to God, Spirit, the universe etc...) throughout the day, finishing a complaining comment with "AND my life is very blessed," or any other tool that helps you to refocus your attention on what IS good, beautiful etc... keeps resetting our stress reaction, calming us, and helping us to respond to life as it is in THIS moment.

These ARE just a few of the short practices and tools we can draw on in these difficult days. Whatever meditation, prayer, contemplative, yoga practices you have PLEASE use them. May each of you experience health and peace in these challenging times.

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