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# 10 Top Tips and Techniques for Better Health

*from the pages of*

THE HEALTHY MIND  
HEALTHY BODY  
H A N D B O O K

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and Robert Ornstein, PhD

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## *A Fable ...*

### Sink or Swim

Once upon a time, in a land not very far away, was a community located along the banks of a river. The citizens of the community were distressed because so many people were drowning in the river. So they developed ambulance speedboats, impressive resuscitation procedures, and intensive care units. Sometimes the rescues worked, but often they did not. Either way, their heroic medical efforts fully occupied their time, attention and resources.

Then one day, someone asked,  
“Why don’t these people learn to swim?”

This booklet is about learning to swim. Practicing these simple skills can help you prevent illness in the first place. And if you do “fall into the river” and become ill, these “swimming lessons” will enhance your ability to recover.

## *1 six-second mini-relaxation*

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Sometimes called “the quieting reflex,” this simple but powerful exercise is designed to counteract emergency stress reactions. It is also a good “warm up” to other mind/body techniques that work best when you get into a relaxed state.

This exercise relieves muscle tightening, jaw clenching, breath holding, and activation of the sympathetic nervous system. To be effective, it should be practiced frequently throughout the day and at the moment a stressful situation arises. It can be done with your eyes opened or closed.

- Become aware of what is annoying you: a ringing phone, a sarcastic comment, the urge to smoke, a worrisome thought. This becomes the cue to start the exercise.

- Repeat the phrase, “alert mind, calm body” to yourself.
- Smile inwardly with your eyes and your mouth. This stops facial muscles from making a fearful or angry expression. The inward smile is more a feeling than something obvious to anyone observing you.
- Inhale slowly to the count of three, imagining that the breath comes in through the bottom of your feet. Then exhale slowly. Feel your breath move back down your legs and out through your feet. Let your jaw, tongue, and shoulder muscles go limp.

With several months’ practice, the quieting reflex becomes an automatic skill.

—Adapted from the work of Dr. Charles Stroebel

## 2 Belly breathing

Focusing your awareness on breathing is an excellent way to settle your mind and relax. Just as we gasp with amazement, choke with sadness, or sigh with relief, breathing often mirrors our emotions. Breathing gets irregular and ragged with anger; it stops with fear. Changing your breathing can shift your attention and your mood. It is difficult to maintain tension, pain, anxiety, or anger while breathing in a relaxed way. The next time you feel particularly stressed or in a bad mood, notice your breathing. Cultivate the natural habit of deep, diaphragmatic belly breathing in place of the shallow, rapid chest breathing that usually accompanies tension and anxiety. Practice this exercise:

- Lie down on your back on a comfortable surface. You may wish to bend your knees, keeping your feet slightly apart. Loosen your belt or any restrictive clothing.
- Place your hands gently just below your belly button. Close your eyes, and imagine a balloon inside your abdomen.
- Each time you breathe in, imagine the balloon filling with air. Your hands will gently rise. Each time you breathe out, imagine the balloon deflating. Your hands will gently settle lower down.
- Focus on the sound and sensation of breathing as you become more and more relaxed.

At first belly breathing may feel unusual. With practice, it becomes second nature and you'll discover its relaxing benefits.

## 3 Visualization

The thoughts, words and images that flow from your imagination can have very real physiological consequences for your body. *Your brain often cannot distinguish whether you're imagining something or actually experiencing it* as this exercise demonstrates. You can learn to use the power of your imagination to produce calming, energizing or healing responses in your body. With visualization, you deliberately focus your mind on a particular image. You can enrich your experience by adding smells, tastes, sounds and other sensations to your visualization. Practice this exercise to hone your visualization skills.

- Close your eyes. See yourself standing in your kitchen. Imagine the time of day, the color of the countertops, the appliances, the cupboards. Hear the hum of the refrigerator.
- Notice a large, plump, juicy orange lying on the cutting board. Pick it up and feel its weight. Feel the texture of its dimpled, glossy skin. With a sharp knife, carefully cut a large slice.
- As you cut into the orange, notice the rich, liquidy, fragrant juice trickle onto the counter top. See the bright whiteness of the pulp in contrast with the orange flesh. See the small drops of orange juice forming on the cut surface.
- Now imagine lifting this dripping slice of orange to your mouth and smelling its sweet, fresh scent. Your mouth begins to water as you slowly bite into the orange. It releases a flood of sweet tangy juice into your mouth.

This juicy orange imagery exercise causes most people to salivate. Just the words and multi-sensory images are enough to trigger a physiological response. In this case it's the flow of saliva. You can learn to use the power of your imagination to control other body functions.

# 4 self-hypnosis

Far from some mysterious or magical force, hypnosis is a natural, relaxing state of mind that you can put to work for the benefit of your health. It is a state of attentive, focused concentration which allows you to be relaxed and receptive, do more, and to think, evaluate and judge less.

Self-hypnosis enables you to control your attention and filter out painful or unpleasant thoughts, feelings or sensations. By learning self-hypnosis, you can capitalize on your natural ability to concentrate to reduce anxiety, relax muscles, control fears, diminish pain, improve mood, boost creativity and help change unwanted habits.

- Get into a relaxed position. You might want to use the “Six-second mini-relaxation” exercise on page 3.
- Take several slow, deep breaths.
- Fix your eyes on an object—a candle, a picture or anything fixed. Say to yourself, “My eyelids are feeling very heavy, very heavy. Little weights are dragging them down. They feel so heavy they want to close.”
- Allow your eyes to roll up towards the top of your head while your eyelids gently close.
- As your eyes close, say to yourself, “Relax. I will count backwards slowly from 10 to 1. With each number, I will become more and more deeply relaxed and at peace.” You may wish to count backwards from 10 to 1 several times, becoming more and more deeply relaxed with each cycle.
- After you say each number, add a phrase such as, “My body is becoming much more relaxed and calm.”
- Now envision going down in a slow-moving escalator. Count from 10 to 1 as you descend deeper into a state of warmth and relaxation. Repeat to yourself, “Drifting down, down, down, into total relaxation. Drifting deeper, deeper, deeper and deeper.”

- Take advantage of this state of relaxed, focused awareness by offering yourself suggestions to improve some mental or physical aspect of yourself. Set a clear goal and give yourself specific suggestions to achieve it. You can also develop suggestions to yourself for managing specific problems such as insomnia, chronic pain, low self-esteem, excessive worry, fears, or smoking. You can adapt the following examples by making them specific to your needs and situation. Use positive words and avoid the word “try” which implies doubt.

**To boost motivation:** “I am confident that I will achieve my goals. As I work toward them my enthusiasm and confidence grows.”

**To communicate better:** “I feel relaxed and at ease with other people. I state clearly how I feel and what I need. My point of view and needs are important.”

**To stop smoking:** “I can stop smoking. The taste of a cigarette is extremely unpleasant. If I get an urge to smoke, I can watch it rise and then fade away. My body thanks me for not smoking.”

- Repeat each self-suggestion at least three times. It helps to add a key phrase or action to your suggestions to reinforce the hypnotic suggestion such as, “Whenever I hear the phone ring, I take a deep breath and relax,” or “Whenever I fold my hands together, I feel secure and confident.”
- When you have finished your suggestions, say, “Now I am going to wake up. I will feel alert and refreshed.” Count back up from 1 to 10. Pause a moment after each number and repeat to yourself, “I am more alert, refreshed, and wide awake.”

Getting the full benefits of self-hypnosis may take 20 minutes. Don’t get frustrated if at first you aren’t able to maintain the focused concentration. Within a week or two of daily practice, self-hypnosis will get easier and more effective.

## 5 Laugh

Laughter has been shown to lower pain thresholds, reduce stress and even boost immune system function. Laughter is called “inner jogging.” A robust laugh gives the muscles of your face, shoulders, diaphragm, and abdomen a good workout. Heart rate and blood pressure temporarily rise, breathing becomes faster and deeper and oxygen surges through your bloodstream. Your muscles go limp and your blood pressure may fall, leaving you in a mellow euphoria. A good laugh can burn up as many calories per hour as brisk walking. During a good hearty laugh your brain orchestrates hormonal rushes rousing you to high-level alertness and numbing pain. Researchers speculate that laughter triggers the release of endorphins, the brain’s opiates. Here are some tips for honing your sense of humor and getting more laughs in your life.

- Expose yourself to humor. Movies, books, comedians, cartoons...there’s lots of funny stuff around, so use it!
- Keep a humor journal. Listen for the unintentionally amusing remark, funny slips of the tongue, or funny sayings. Notice the funny things that happen to you. Write them down and read your journal from time to time for a pick-me-up.
- Tell a joke. If you hear a good one, tell five other people as soon as possible.
- Laugh at yourself. People who are able to laugh at themselves have a much stronger sense of self-worth and higher self-esteem than those who can’t.
- Look for the funny side. Tune in to the sitcom of your own life. Even stressful situations can be transformed into a bit of fun if you can see the humor in them.
- Exaggerate. Exaggeration helps put things in perspective.

## 6 Avoiding burnout

More and more men and women today are facing the challenges of multiple roles—paid worker, parent and spouse. While some may thrive in this situation, research suggests serious health consequences of the high stress of spreading oneself so thin. Here are some tips for working moms and dads to help balance the demands of job and home.

- Set limits. Schedule and honor your own time to relax, put your feet up and play. Learn to say no.
- Cultivate a mental picture of the many sides of “you” besides your other-centered roles at home or at work—e.g. artist, lover, poet, gardener, runner.
- Make frequent written lists of your own priorities, from the largest (spend time with my children, go to work) to the smallest (take out the recycle boxes). Put them in the order you want and match up your activities and commitments to make sure you’re getting the things done that are truly most important to you. Let the rest go.
- Ask for help. Say exactly what you want from your spouse, significant other, or children. Then negotiate to share responsibilities at home.
- Remember that perfection is the enemy of happiness. Be willing to accept less than perfect performance on household chores.
- Team up with other parents to share the load—child care, dinner clubs, or shuttling.
- Celebrate the healthy pleasures of parenting. Pay attention to the moments of joy that make all the effort worthwhile. Plan regular, specific activities—no matter how small or trivial—to connect with your spouse, child and significant other.

## 7 Halting time pressure

Time pressure can have powerful effects on the body: continuous triggering of the “fight or flight” response, toxic anger toward anyone or anything slowing us down, feeling exhausted and overwhelmed all the time, strain on personal relationships, loss of sleep, falling into bad eating habits. Our sense of time is largely created in our brains; the way we think about time is the way we experience it. Waiting in line, time drags. Dancing in the moonlight, time seems to expand. The trick is to be always on vacation, where nothing hurries us, but a lot happens. Here are some tips for cultivating a healthier sense of time:

- Rushing is a habit. Break the habit by driving 5-10 mph slower. Select the longest grocery checkout line and practice waiting patiently. Try not wearing a watch and not looking at the clock for a day. Give yourself transition time, e.g., sit in the car for a few minutes before getting out. Let the phone ring several times before answering. Or immerse yourself in a pleasurable sensory experience.
- Know what’s important and set priorities. Get rid of anything on your to-do list that doesn’t really need doing.
- Establish your rhythm. Step outside your scheduled routine from time to time and pay attention to your natural rhythms, peaks and valleys of energy, alertness, concentration.
- Be flexible. No matter how well you plan, sometimes things just don’t go as expected. Learn to be flexible, respond to the moment and take advantage of a spontaneous turn of events. Don’t let schedules, clocks and pre-arranged plans overrun your inner sensibilities.
- Practice living in the moment. Being totally absorbed in what we are doing in the moment is an exhilarating experience, one that makes us feel truly alive, positive and productive. It creates the “timeless” moments in which pressures, fears and tensions evaporate.

## 8 Create your inner advisor

Within each of us is a wealth of untapped knowledge, insight, and wisdom which is often drowned out by the incessant chatter of a busy mind. You can use imagery techniques to give voice to your inner wisdom and consult your inner advisor. Explore the meaning of your symptoms or illness, and what you can do to improve your health. Think of this exercise as a means of two-way communication between your mind and body.

- Begin with your favorite relaxation technique.
- When you feel calm and relaxed, invite an inner advisor to come and visit you. Use all your senses to watch for your advisor, as the advisor may take any shape or form. Or you may have several advisors. They may be a person, a voice, an object, or a symbol. If you are not comfortable with what emerges, send him/her/it away and invite another advisor.
- Once you are comfortable with your advisor, ask questions. Feel free to ask anything, such as:
  - Are you my inner advisor?
  - How can I relax?
  - What is causing my tension? Pain? Symptom?
  - What do I need to do to feel better?
  - Who can help me?
- Then wait for the answers. Be patient. They may come in any form: a picture, image, sound, word, phrase, feeling. They can come at any time. Think about what they mean to you.

Sometimes you may be surprised at the directness and clarity of an answer. In response to “What is causing my anger” one person heard back, “You need to learn to say no.” If the meaning or usefulness is not clear to you right away, don’t worry. It may become clearer in the days or weeks ahead.

—Adapted from the work of Martin Rossman, MD  
and the Academy for Guided Imagery

# 9 *Healthy thinking*

To a great extent, our emotions are determined by how we think about events—whether what we say to ourselves reflects positive or negative expectations. A host of research now suggests that upbeat thinking—including optimism, confidence and a sense of control—is healthy thinking.

Use this “10 Questions” exercise to identify and change your own negative thought patterns to improve your mood and health. Each time you discover a distorted, pessimistic thought, write it down. Then run through this list of questions and rewrite your thought to something more positive.

- What’s really bothering me? Sometimes it’s difficult to put your finger on the real source of a negative thought or bad feeling. Review your activities for the past day or two. What have you been doing recently? With whom have you been talking? Try to identify a specific event, situation or encounter that might have triggered the negative thoughts that then led to the bad feelings.
- Am I thinking in “all-or-nothing” or “either-or” terms? Watch out for words like “all,” “nothing,” “totally,” “completely,” and “always.” Avoid trapping yourself between unrealistic alternative viewpoints. For example, a statement like “I’m stupid and everyone else is brilliant” could be more positively expressed as “This was not one of my brighter moments.”
- Am I assuming every situation is the same? In every situation, you have the choice to respond differently. Avoid over-generalizing, locking yourself into a future that’s the same as the past. Again, words like “always” and “never” will be tip-offs: “I’m always late.”
- Am I assuming the worst? Do you tend to assume the worst with “awfulizing” thoughts? Do you imagine catastrophe? When you consider the worst thing that could happen, would it truly be a catastrophe? With catastrophic thinking, small events become disasters and sig-

nificant problems become exaggerated.

- Am I making an unrealistic or unfair comparison? Our minds judge by comparison: experience vs. expectation; this year vs. last; him vs. me, etc. Begin to evaluate your comparisons and expectations. Tell yourself, “At this moment, I’m doing the best I can.”
  - Do I have evidence to support my conclusion? You may find yourself jumping to conclusions, assuming that you know what the future holds. “I’ll never find another job.” You may discover you’re assuming you can read someone’s mind. “Sally thinks I’m irresponsible.” Question your assumptions.
  - Are my worries worth worrying about? We all worry. “My pension is inadequate and my family will starve.” But what is the likelihood of your worry coming to pass? Make sure you have a good reason to worry. If so, do what you can to fix the situation.
  - Am I blaming myself for something beyond my control? Accepting personal responsibility is reasonable only when you’re dealing with something you could have reasonably influenced.
  - Am I expecting perfection? Do you really think that people should never make mistakes? If you do, you’re going to be disappointed often. Give everyone, including yourself, a break!
  - What difference will this make next week? In a year from now? In ten years? Will anyone care that you made a stupid remark a few years from now? Our mistakes are rarely fixed in some else’s mind.
- In general, practice using your thoughts to increase your happiness. Think about positive events and experiences in your daily life as much as possible. Focus on what you have, not what you lack. Rather than mulling over your shortcomings or difficulties, make it a habit to think about the good things in your life.

# 10 *communication*

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Communicating effectively enhances our health and self esteem, nurtures relationships and helps us cope with stress. When we communicate effectively and feel understood, life is joyous and satisfying. We feel in control of events. We're valued at work, people trust and respect us—even sex is more fulfilling. When communication breaks down, heart rate speeds up. Cholesterol and blood sugar levels rise. We become more susceptible to headaches, backaches, digestive problems and are more sensitive to pain. Fortunately, effective communication can be learned. There's increasing evidence that even minor changes in communication skills can produce major results. Some tips:

- Learn to listen. Attentive listening is an active process that requires your energetic participation, openness and receptivity Practice the four keys to active listening:

1. *Ask for clarification.* Asking friendly questions when something is unclear allows you to get more information and demonstrate your interest and concern. "Please tell me more about that." "Can you give me an example?" Some people feel threatened by questions so be gentle and supportive. Be especially careful with "why" questions. "Why do you want to take a night course?" Try instead, "Is there something special you want to learn?"

2. *Reflect content.* This is not parroting, but offering a creative summary of what you hear the person saying. It's OK if you're off base; the purpose is to correct misunderstandings.

3. *Reflect feelings.* Let the other person know that you heard the emotional content. Listen between the lines. What is the person feeling but not saying? Try empathy. "If I were having that experience, what would I be feeling?"

4. *Reflect Meanings.* The combination of feelings, facts and interpretations result in meaning. As you begin to sense links between feelings and facts, offer your tentative interpretations as feedback in an accepting, non-judgemental way.

- Watch your body language. For example, to make an

assertive statement, look directly at the other person with a friendly expression. Avoid grimaces, lip biting. Relax your arms and legs. Stand tall and confident.

- Learn to be assertive. This means speaking and acting from choice and standing up for your rights in a friendly way without being aggressive. To make your statement assertive, do three things: 1) State your perception/observation. 2) Share your thoughts/feelings. 3) Make your wants and needs clear. Stick to the facts. Try to avoid words like "always" and "never" which seldom describe reality and often elicit defensive reactions. Try making specific requests as opposed to complaining. For example, if you want your son to mow the lawn, tell him: "I would like you to mow the lawn some time this afternoon. Will you agree to that?" This is more likely to initiate constructive communication than complaining, "Look at the lawn. It hasn't been mowed in weeks. It's depressing."

- Just say no. Learning how to decline a request is a simple but important life skill. Many of us have a hard time saying no, even when we're overwhelmed. Some tips: Separate the person from the task. Say no to the request without rejecting the requester. Offer no further explanation, no details of your busy schedule. If the requestor persists, use the "broken record" strategy: "I understand your need, I just can't take on any more tasks right now."

- Respect conversational styles. Gender, where you were born, family size, occupation and cultural background are just a few of the factors contributing to different styles. Just recognizing differences can go a long way to reduce misunderstanding, frustration and resentment.

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