

STAYING SANE WHEN THERE IS CHAOS ALL AROUND

As leader you not only have to take care of yourself, but you also must inspire and serve those you lead. And 20 months into a pandemic that is rewriting the script of our lives, that is not a trivial task. We are not only adapting to radically different ways of working in our own lives as well as those that we lead, but we also do this in an atmosphere of devastating illness and death. I am sure you have spent a lot of time figuring out how to best function in a world so full of challenges, and I am sure you have your own strategies. So, what follows is not a sweeping and encompassing approach to Life, rather it is a random collection of small, quick, and easy practices that you can add to what you do already, be it for yourself as well as others. They may kickstart some new practices for you. They are all also practices you can share with those you lead, to create a collective resting place. They have come to me from a myriad of sources, and I will share those sources as much I remember them!

Practices to start meetings

Check-ins are great ways to get body and mind in the same place, so the work that needs to be done in a meeting has everyone's full attention.

1. Gratitude practice

Science has shown that our problem-solving abilities, our ability to retain knowledge, our thinking in general increases dramatically when we are in a positive frame of mind. Gratitude is a real easy way to achieve this, so consider starting your meetings with a quick round of gratitude. When you introduce this, make sure you make it clear that people need to only bring one thing, and that it does not have to be grandiose or deep – it can be as simple as the weather. It makes it easier for others if you start them off, so be sure to be succinct, light, and open. A structure could be: "Complete the following sentence: One thing I am grateful for today is..."

2. What I leave at the door...

If you have a little more time, consider a check-in at the start of the meeting that invites everyone to share what they need to leave at the door (virtual or otherwise!) to be present. Invite them to park it there so they don't forget to pick it up when they leave, but to be intentional about leaving it there. Sharing in this way generally creates awareness that everyone is busy, it connects people to one another, and it also creates empathy, all of which will help the work in the meeting flow better.

3. Quiet preparation

A lot of people have started "running" from one virtual to the next, with hardly a break in between. The impact of being in meetings all day is that there is never time to prepare for the next meeting. If it is possible and appropriate, consider giving people the first 5 minutes of a meeting to go through the preparation for the meeting. Cameras off, on mute, this will give those who did not prepare a chance to catch up and not have to pretend they have done the prep the whole rest of the meeting, and at the same time it gives those who did have the time to do the prep the chance to take a much deserved 5-minute break away from their screen.

Practices to create a moment of mental rest, anytime, anywhere

We sometimes think that we need to spend an hour a day meditating, or being in nature, or whatever your preferred way of active resting is, to restore ourselves. Whilst those practices are invaluable, it is useful to have a few others in our back pocket to pull out when all we have is a minute or two.

1. Three deep breaths

Our breath becomes shallow when we are stressed or anxious, which means that we do not take in enough oxygen to fuel our cells or our brains, and that we do not exhale the carbon dioxide in our lungs properly. We gradually become more tired, and our thinking becomes foggier. The good news is that three deep breaths, three proper breaths, are enough to reset your nervous system and remind you to breathe properly. The Buddhists take three deep breaths every time they walk through a door. What current practice can you link three deep breaths to? Every time you look at the clock? Setting a gong timer on your phone every 20 minutes or so? Find something that you do already and link those three deep breaths to the practice. Nothing more is needed, just three deep breaths.

2. Connecting with your senses

Connecting with our bodies takes us out of our heads for the tiniest amount of time, which often gives us a new perspective, or at least a brief respite. You can do this anywhere, anytime – just sharpen your senses through really looking, really listening, even smelling. The following is an easy exercise to get you started:

- You do not have to close your eyes, simply take your time:
- What is 1 thing that you are tasting in your mouth?
- What are 2 things that you are smelling?
- What are 3 things that you are feeling against or on your body?
- What are 4 things that you are hearing?
- Without moving your head, what are 5 things that you are seeing?

Generally, that helps us get out of our heads, ready for more alert and creative thinking.

3. Count your breaths

Another simple technique to bring us into the current moment and give our thinking a few well-deserved moments of rest is to simply count your breaths, but in a particular way:

- Count every breath, until you get to seven,
- Then start from 1 again.
- Every time you lose count, start from 1 again
- Try to get to 7 times 7 breaths

It sounds inane, but when our heads are fixated on a problem, they will stray to that problem again. Giving the brain a task, like an Indian elephant gets to hold a chain with its trunk, will create some space for us to really think. Don't be surprised if you use this exercise as a check-in, and you get unusually creative thoughts during the rest of the meeting.

Practices for the body

When prey animals escape a predator, they keep running long afterwards. This practice gets rid of the adrenaline their bodies released in the chase, since otherwise they will be susceptible to high blood pressure, weight gain, etc. If that sounds familiar, it is because the exact same thing happens to us as humans: excess adrenalin and cortisol impact our health over the long term. Regular exercise is therefore even more important than it has been before, even if it is a relatively small amount of time on a daily or weekly basis. What follows are some small practices that can help your body cope during the working day.

1. 50 Knee bends

This exercise is the easiest way to energise your body:

- Stand with your feet hip distance apart
- Put your hands on your hips
- Bend your knees to dip your body 50 times fast, keeping the upper body upright. We are not talking squats, it is enough to bend the knees roughly once per second, then straighten.

2. Releasing the muscles

In this exercise it usually helps to close your eyes, but it is not strictly necessary.

- Starting at the top of your head, tense all the muscles of your scalp, as much as you can
- Hold for 2 heartbeats
- And release
- Move to your face. Scrunch it up as best you can, hold for 2 heartbeats, then release
- Move to your neck and shoulders, pulling your shoulders up to your ears. Hold, and release
- Tense, hold and then release all the muscle groups below, one by one
- Upper arms
- Then lower arms
- Then hands, clenching them into fists
- Back to your torso, clenching the muscles of your chest and upper back
- Drop into your stomach and mid-back
- Hips and surrounds
- Then bum and genital area
- Upper legs
- Knees and calves
- Ankles and feet, scrunching up the toes
- And then simply relax the entire body.

This is a great way to prepare your body for falling asleep. Sleep is the great restorer and the best way to keep us going. Like the quote says: "The difference between hope and despair is often just a good night's sleep".

3. Laughter yoga

Yes, you read that right! Laughter, even when forced, will generate genuine laughter, which in turn will trigger a release in the body, as well as the mind. To get started, throw your head back and force out the most ridiculous laugh you can. Do that again. And

maybe a third time. Until you feel real laughter bubbling up, even if it is for how ridiculous this exercise is!

A variation is to bite on a pencil, between your teeth, which forces your mouth into a smile. Remind your facial muscles what it feels like to smile! And see what comes.

4. Some shenanigans that will help both brain and body!

This exercise will help wake up both brain hemispheres, but you need your arms and your wits about you!

- a. Put the tip of your right hand on the tip of your nose, and touch your right ear with your left hand
- b. Now, move your right hand to your left ear and put the tip of your left hand on the tip of your nose. In other words, switch
- c. Now do a again
- d. And b
- e. And keep going, as fast as you can!

In closing

A few years ago, I read a book by Tom Rath, called "*Eat, Move, Sleep*". Tom is an accomplished author, and one of the minds behind the well-known Strengths Finder tool. What people do not know about Tom is that he is suffering from a condition that forces him to balance his drive and life's work, with looking after his health. While balance is important for all of us, in Tom's case it means a sure death if he goes out of balance. And what I took away from his story and his book is that it is not the sweeping changes, the big habits, necessarily that creates the impact. It is the small everyday habits. So, whilst my hope for you is that you keep achieving the big things, my plea to you is to also embrace the small things. The breath. The wonder of the world that is still open to us through our senses, even in a ravaged world. The dogged determination of our bodies to carry our minds and spirits through this world.

Integrate that into your world, help those you lead integrate it into theirs, and who knows what becomes possible?

Thank you for the good work you are doing in this world, and good luck!

With love and thanks to those who lead me.

Antoinette Coetzee - November 2021