

Konrad Wiesendanger

ESM

Embodied Stress Management

Escape the Stress Trap with Agile Mindfulness

Free Ebook: About the Method



Konrad Wiesendanger

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Acknowledgments

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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.

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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

allergies. Most slipped disks are not caused by an accident but rather by the inner tension of flexor and extensor muscles. This so-called co-contraction burdens the joints year after year – until the weakest link gives way.

The skeletal musculature, which we can consciously control, also interacts reciprocally with the autonomous nervous system. Above all the respiratory muscles, pelvic floor muscles, tongue, lips, throat and jaw muscles, the muscles at the back of the neck and the shoulders as well as the hands react very quickly to stress by tensing up.

On the other hand, we are able to influence our vegetative nervous system by making slow, gentle and rhythmic movements. Think how you comfort a baby: You take him into your arms and gently rock him back and forth. With the gentle, rocking pressure you put on the baby's body, you rhythmically move his skeletal muscles, and he can calm down.

So, if you become more aware of your body through gentle movements, you will gain access to the resources that can help you deal with stress effectively. You will be able to identify your reactions to stress sooner and will find a more efficient way to deal with stressors by learning new behavioral patterns.

Stress and the Brain

Recent research shows that stress can cause structural changes in the brain. Certain areas of the brain reduce their performance and shrink while others are energized even more and grow. In a way, the front area of the cerebrum, the prefrontal cortex, is the director of the processes in the brain. This is where planning and contemplating take place. This is where sensible decisions are made, and our urges are controlled. The prefrontal cortex, however, is also the slowest area of the brain which also uses up the highest amount of energy. For prehistoric human beings, however, any slow and energy-intensive processes were an unnecessary risk when they found themselves stressed by the attack of a predator. That is why even today, stress inhibits the activity of the prefrontal cortex and activates the affective motor reactions that are controlled by deeper brain structures instead. Since brain structures will shrink if they are not used enough over a long period of time, permanent stress can reduce the performance of our control center for planning and sensitivity.

And there is more. Another zone in the brain that is associated with stress is the amygdala. This area of the brain is responsible for storing oppressive memories. The amygdala constantly watches out for similar experiences in order to be prepared for dealing with them. It reacts quickly and sets the body in motion even before we are aware of any danger. In prehistoric times this brain func-

tion was essential for survival. But even in today's traffic we are only able to cope with an alert amygdala.

Because brain structures grow where there is a great need to function, the function of the amygdala and related structures becomes ever more dominant. Increased irritability and even anxiety attacks are the result.

There is nothing we can do about our reflexes. They are always faster than our common sense.

The reciprocal interaction between increased impulsive fear reflexes and decreased ability for reason-controlled reflection can lead to a vicious cycle in our stress behavior. Then we sense threats everywhere and are less and less able to subject them to a reality check. Our stress increases, and we are stuck in the stress trap.

There is nothing we can do about our reflexes. They are always faster than our common sense. What we can do, however, is to become aware of these reflexes, which, after all, occur inside our body and then slow down our reactions. Taking a couple of deep breaths is often helpful. But since breathing usually is the function that reacts to stress first, we can't always access deep breathing. The mindfulness and movement exercises in this book will help you to learn an easy way out of the stress trap.

Mindfulness and Deceleration

When it comes to dealing well with stress, you often hear the terms “mindfulness” and “deceleration”. At first glance that might sound like a paradox: there is already way too much we are supposed to be mindful of. We can work as fast as we can and still don’t accomplish our goals!

Under stress you actually experience such a concentration of impressions that you can no longer deal with them. You lose your orientation and don’t know what is important and what is urgent anymore. You no longer know what to do or how to do it in order to get out of a situation without getting hurt. In addition, you experience worries and fears: “I’m not good enough; I’m the only one who’s suffering in this situation. If it continues like this, I’ll lose my job...”

Mindfulness is the ability to become aware of the present moment.

We can only act in the present. This one moment in which we can do something is short and clear. Only few things happen all at the same time. We inhale or exhale; we look the person we are talking to in the eye. We feel the ground under our feet or the seat under our buttocks. These experiences help us to organize the next moment. Everything else is nothing but memories, interpretations, and fears that are either located in the past or in the future. They are important for our life as adults. However, they

hold us back because we can't differentiate between them and the events that take place now in the present. If we try to deal with this overwhelming number of impressions all at once, we obstruct ourselves. Then we use up a great deal of energy while achieving only very little.

Mindfulness is the ability to become aware of the present moment. To feel what is happening to me right now and what options are available to me at this very moment. A saying goes that every journey starts with the first step. If you are mindful, you become aware of this first step and realize what options you have. And there are many more of them than you think.

**Deceleration does not mean simply dawdling
slowly through the world from now on.**

Deceleration does not mean simply dawdling slowly through the world from now on. Speed has a lot to do with perception. Anyone who learns a new skill, such as dancing or driving, knows the feeling that too much is happening too quickly. Yet virtuosos in these areas seem to have all the time in the world to do things right. They don't even have to exert themselves. What makes virtuosos different from beginners is their ability to see earlier and more precisely what the appropriate next step is. Their perception is not distorted by unnecessary worries and self-reflection. They are confident that they will find out in time if they deviate from the ideal path. When we suffer from stress, we act like a beginner in dance class:

With muscle power we try to accomplish that which requires precision; we try to use our knowledge where it is necessary to get a feeling for the situation first. We try to be fast – and become hectic and inefficient.

Many Roads Lead to Mindfulness

Meditation, spirituality, and psychotherapy are ways that help us to learn more about ourselves and find ourselves again. Risky sports activities, mountain climbing or running marathons are also ways for us to find ourselves. But most often mindfulness and meditation practices from the Asian cultures are adopted. In a cold and performance-oriented world Yoga, Tai Chi, Chi Gong, Zen, or Vipassana meditations are supposed to provide us with an access to our hidden values. That which is an integral part of the Chinese, Indian or Japanese culture is practiced as a technique in our world. However, these methods are frequently tied to a romantic glorification of Far Eastern culture, which makes it hard for sober-minded people to engage in them.

These methods are frequently tied to a romantic glorification of Far Eastern culture.

In our own culture methods of mindfulness training have emerged which were partly inspired by Eastern philosophies but then were formally organized according to Western principles. One of the most well-known training methods of this kind is mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) by Jon Kabat-Zinn, which is linked to yoga and meditation. This training was developed at the Massachusetts University Clinic and is based on psychological and neurological research findings.

Feldenkrais, a Western Way

Since the middle of the last century the Feldenkrais Method, somewhat in the shadow of these popular practices, has been a method of mindfulness that does not employ Eastern terminology. Its founder, Dr. Moshé Feldenkrais (1904-1984), was an engineer and behavioral scientist. He, too, was familiar with Asian martial arts and yoga, but his justification for including the elements of these practices that flowed into his method were based on scientific arguments.

The Feldenkrais Method deals with human development and applies mindful movements. Moshé Feldenkrais was convinced that human beings can develop their full potential if they orient themselves toward Planet Earth's field of gravity, are aware of their physical movements already at the moment of intention, and are able to carry out their movements and actions effortlessly and with a minimum of muscle power.

The Feldenkrais Method deals with human development and applies mindful movements.

The success of any action is determined primarily at its beginning, at the very moment when the intention turns into the action. Success does not only mean the externally visible completion of the action but also the satisfaction and elegance felt while carrying out the action. Elegance is the feeling that occurs when an action

runs smoothly, when effort, expenditure, and gain are in a positive balance. By training an inner esthetic competence, any dependence on external criteria – the cause of a lot of stress experiences – is reduced.

Experience it yourself

Watch people in a busy place. You will hardly see two people who walk exactly the same way. Some swing their arms while others don't; some straighten their leg when taking their next step whereas others may bend the leg. Some will hardly move their hips while others swing their hips in many different ways.

Now pick an individual with a walking style you find elegant, and try to copy this style discretely.

What do you perceive?

Does this walking style feel elegant in your own body, too? Or is it strenuous? Are there areas in your body that do not really want to go along with it? Does walking this way feel pleasant but unfamiliar and perhaps a bit embarrassing to you? Which detail of this walking style do you want to adopt because it feels better than what you are used to?

The Feldenkrais Method is a learning technique. At the same time, it also demonstrates major therapeutic success. By applying mindful movements and thus learning more about yourself and your habits, you will lay the foundation for self-healing. Learning about yourself, however, does not conform with traditional learning in school, where existing knowledge is conveyed. Learning according to Feldenkrais is experience-based learning or “organic learning”, as Moshé Feldenkrais called it. Organic learning is like the learning processes of toddlers who learn how to walk and to talk by playing, without any concepts or instructions. Organic learning is a kind of supervised research on yourself with an open end and without any pressure to succeed.

**Organic learning is a kind of supervised research on yourself
with an open end and without any pressure to succeed.**

Due to its open structure, the Feldenkrais Method is implemented successfully in various disciplines. Feldenkrais provides a framework for efficient and sustainable development – from special education to mental training for professional athletes, from gentle flexibility training to assisting musicians and dancers, and from relaxation and sleep training up to mindfulness training for individuals suffering from stress.

Embodiment and Movement

“My mind is strong, but my body is weak...” . The dualistic concept of human beings that differentiates between body and mind is a concept that is familiar to most people. It goes back to the philosopher René Descartes (1596-1690) and was a cornerstone of the Western culture for centuries. It was only in the last one hundred years that other models have started to replace the Cartesian world-view. Yet most Westerners still see themselves as a material body, in which a non-material mind resides.

Most Westerners see themselves as a material body, in which a non-material mind resides.

Embodiment means the reciprocal interaction between body and soul and assumes that these two are inseparably connected to each other. Thoughts, emotions, and sensual feelings are sensed by the body and expressed through the body. The role the body's movements play in this connection is interesting. You can consider movement to be the interface between individuals and their environment (Fig. 1, next page).

Humans think (cognitively), sense (sensually) and feel (emotionally). That is how they process the impressions they get from the world around them. The combination of these three aspects is individually distinct and depends on genetic predispositions and cultural influence. It is decisive for the human personality. These aspects cannot

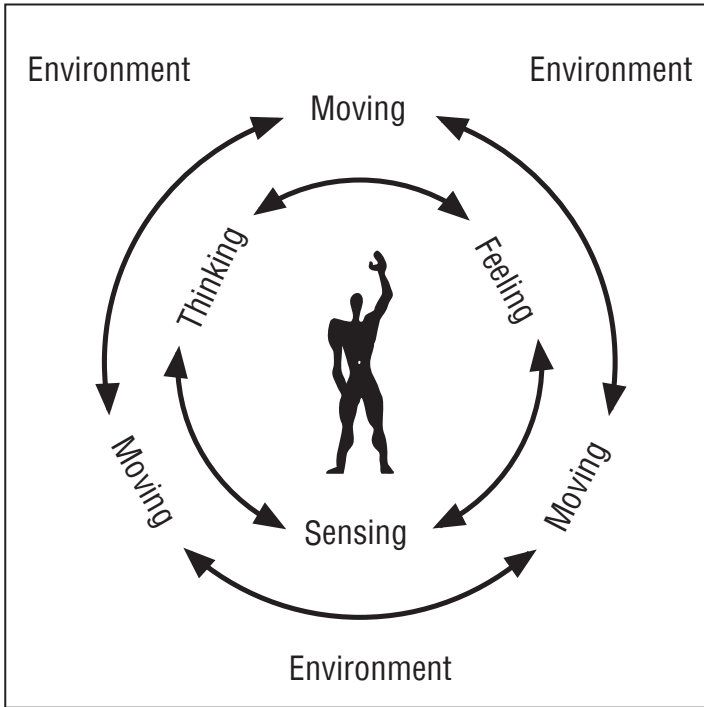


Fig. 1

be distinctly separated from each other but rather flow into each other. Basically, they merely illustrate the varying forms of impression and expression that a human being can experience. Movement is the interface to the individual's environment. Movement creates differences that may be sensed, assessed, and taken as a reason to act.

Any change in the environment, whether it is caused by human beings or nature, triggers movements in the

human body that are processed simultaneously in a cognitive, sensory, and emotional manner. This combination, however, varies among individuals. Human beings react to these stimulations: They move, talk, get red in the face or stop moving. These different reactions are then noticed by their environment. The less tension that occurs in the process, the easier it is for people to maintain or regain their physical and mental balance.

Movement is the interface to the individual's environment. Movement creates differences that may be sensed, assessed, and taken as a reason to act

So it is to our advantage that the movements we sense and cause conform with our intentions and wishes as much as possible. If we sense movements as early as possible and can react to them before our energies are unduly strained, our orientation skills will stay intact and we will have enough time to develop solutions that meet our needs.

The advantage of this model of movements is that every situation in human life can be described phenomenologically¹. That means that you only describe the differences created by movement and take a little time with the content-related interpretation. For instance, a

1 The term of "phenomenology" was coined by the Austrian philosopher and mathematician Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). It describes the focus on that which can be directly experienced or perceived. It attempts to avoid any prejudices, preconceptions, judgments or hypotheses as much as possible.

tightening of your stomach may indicate hunger, anger or that the body is struggling against gravity. What is perceived first, however, is the feeling that your stomach is tightening.

Example

Recall a challenging situation in the past. It can be a conflict, an accident, an illness, the loss of your job or any other situation in which you were at your wits' end.

How did you feel at that moment? Do you recall that your mouth was dry? Did it leave you breathless? Did you stomp away angrily or were you petrified? Did you toss and turn in bed at night or did you lose all of your incentive?

These memories are all linked to movements. Immobility, the absence of any movement, has to do with movement, too, and requires muscle power as well.

And now recall how your problem started to disappear. Perhaps you received help or came up with a solution. Maybe enough time passed by and made the problem less overwhelming.

How did you perceive yourself when your problem started to go away? Were you suddenly able to breathe freely again? Did you feel as if a heavy load had been

lifted from you? Did you cry tears of relief? Did you feel like laughing about the problem you had overcome?

These memories have to do with movement, too. Now, when you familiarize yourself with the difference between your movements while experiencing a problem and those while solving the problem, you will find it easier to take that first step toward restoring your equilibrium.

Movement is not the only principle for a solution. The contents of the challenge also play a certain role. But as we have seen, movement is involved in every step. When nothing is working any more, we still have the option of making a difference through movements and improving our well-being a bit even in moments of suffering.

The Value of Small Movements

Movement can have many different meanings. In our culture, movement is primarily linked to sports and fitness. Muscles become stronger when they are exercised to their limits. Vigorous movement sustains blood circulation and health in general. A fit body can handle stress better and will recuperate faster. But fitness alone is not enough. The point at which you start to suffer from stress may come somewhat later but the moment when stress begins is when the health of even fit individuals is endangered.

The Embodied Stress Management Training builds on small movements. These micromoves are used to sense differences better. Since the human body can sense differences only up to a certain relationship to the experienced stimulus, the ability to differentiate increases in an inverse relationship to the size of the stimulus.² In other words: We can sense ourselves much better and more exactly if we concentrate on micromoves.

Small and simple processes of movement focus our attention on the current moment. They can be done in nearly every day-to-day situation and are available to us when we need them most. All exercises in this book can

² According to the “Weber Fechner Law” there is a rather stable connection between the perception of acoustic, visual or kinesthetic differences in stimuli. You can, for instance, sense a relative difference of about 2% in weight of an object you hold in your hand. A weight increase of 1 gram in an object that weighs 50 grams is still albeit barely noticeable. If the object weighs 5 kilograms, though, you will only perceive an increase in its weight if that increase is at least 100 grams.

be done so subtly that although you can definitely feel them, others will hardly notice them.

Those of you who stay fit by doing sports and at the same time do micromoves will not only be protected from the damaging effects of stress but will also run less risk of getting injured while doing sports.

Limits and Differences

Experiencing stress is experiencing limits. Most people want to grow and expand their limits. They only take experiences seriously that are close to the limit. Anything else is considered to be tedious, boring and irrelevant. This behavior has its foundation in the way we were raised. We are always urged to do the absolute best we can. And when we manage to do that, nobody asks how we did it. This can lead to our experiencing behavior which is inefficient and even harmful to our health as successful. Then we don't realize that we reached our goal in spite of and not because of that behavior.

The more we focus on the limit the sooner we lose the ability to make use of our resources to the fullest.

Whatever we perceive as our limit is often an existential limit. Staying beyond that limit may be dangerous, because excessive demands, injuries and pain lurk there. Yet this limit also provides security. We can orient ourselves on it; we can lean on it; we know how far we can go.

The more we focus on that limit, though, the sooner we lose the ability to make use of our resources to the fullest. We no longer sense the subtle differences that might direct us to the solution. Our reactions to our environment become increasingly fierce and clumsy. You could compare it to balancing on a narrow beam: The more you

lose your balance, the more strenuous your attempts to stay on the beam become – until you fall down.

Figure 2 shows the way we handle limits by using the symbol of a cow pasture. We act like cows grazing along the fence, hoping that they will eventually be able to graze beyond the fence. A strip two yards wide along the fence is already bare. There is still a lot of delicious grass in the middle of the pasture, but we don't notice that. The grass inside the fence stands for the resources available to us. By hoping to be able to graze outside the fence, we forget and neglect a large part of our

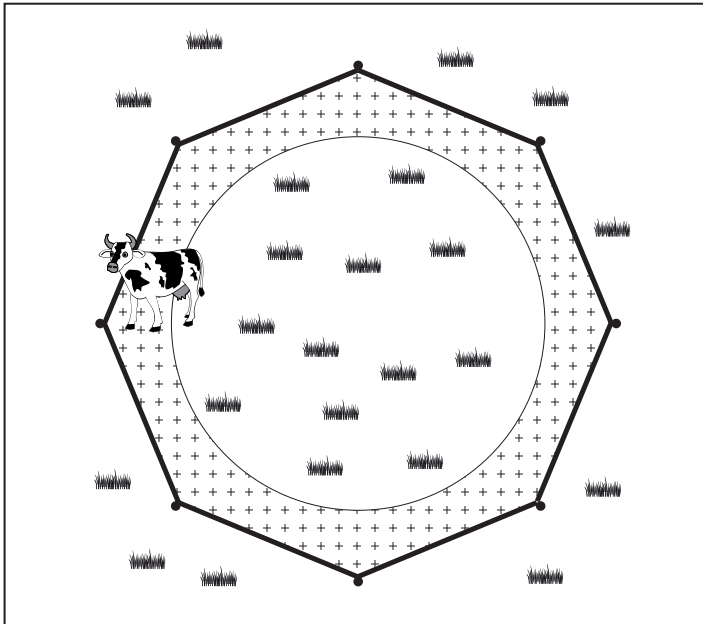


Fig.2

resources. We'd rather keep running along the fence and may even injure ourselves doing that, than venture over to the unfamiliar middle of the pasture. Since orienting ourselves toward the middle of the pasture is not as easy as along the fence, we think that it holds nothing of interest for us. If we learn, however, to access the inside part of the pasture, we will access hidden sides of ourselves that have always been there.

Applying this to stressful experiences means that we can protect our health best when we know what we are capable of. It does not mean that we shouldn't dream of the impossible. But if we make the most of that which is possible, we are better equipped when we do dare to reach out for the impossible.

Dealing with Contrast

If we only focus on the most extreme limit, we are unable to sense subtle differences. Then we have the impression that everything is the same inside the limits. Nothing happens. That, however, is an illusion. We are in motion as long as we live. Motion creates differences. These differences contain the resources for effective stress management. Recognizing differences is the prerequisite for sensing the here and now and acting appropriately in accordance with one's abilities.

We are in motion as long as we live.

It is interesting why we assume that "nothing happens." We tend to exaggerate our perception and to describe things with as much contrast as possible. So, if a perception fails to exceed a subconsciously defined inner value, it is disregarded. If asked, we will then describe it more precisely by saying, "It's almost nothing." Even our body language and the sound of our voice while making this statement already indicate that it is insignificant. This "almost nothing" can, however, definitely be described. The same applies to the opposite of "nothing": I "always" miss the bus. I am "never" taken into consideration. "Everybody" wants something from me but "nobody" ever gives me something in return.

Though this exaggerated contrast allows us to describe the world we experience in simpler terms, the

resources for the solution of problems lie in the low-contrast nuances and are therefore not available to us if we only pay attention to high contrasts.

Overexertion and stress are so dangerous to our health because their symptoms get ignored for too long. When you can no longer ignore them, your perception switches back to the other extreme. Then you don't notice anything except your own suffering anymore. The moment right now, in which you could find islands of recuperation, dissipates either because of the devaluation of the subtle differences or because of the exaggeration of the strong stimuli.

Esthetics as a Criterion of Measurement

Stress can be measured in various ways. Blood pressure, skin conductance, heart rhythm, breathing rhythm or stress hormone level are all potential indicators of stress.

Getting the measured values of these body functions requires medical appliances and experts, and it requires a certain effort. These measured values can be stored and evaluated for statistical purposes. For individuals suffering from stress, however, the value of these numbers is limited. Indeed, you can see at any given point in time if the stress level is higher or lower than before, and you can determine whether organic causes have a strong influence on your stressful experience, but with this knowledge you still can't control your immediate behavior in a stressful situation.

ESM uses a different evaluation of the stress level: Felt esthetics³. Felt esthetics is a subjective value which cannot be depicted and therefore cannot be evaluated. Yet this feeling is available, immediately and directly. There are no absolute values nor is there a maximum value on the scale of deeply felt esthetics.

Felt esthetics continues to develop the more experience people gain in how they deal with their self-perception.

3 The term "felt esthetics" can be understood similarly to "felt sense" in Focusing (Eugene Gendlin). Felt sense is defined as "the inner knowledge or awareness that has not been consciously thought or verbalized". Accordingly, felt esthetics is the inner sensation of satisfaction and beauty of a movement or action.

What is felt esthetics?

Stress is not pretty. Without being aware of it, we judge our actions from an esthetic point of view. You can tell if somebody is stressed out. You can see the tension in his face, jaws, the back of his neck and in his hands. His movements will be less fluid than they could be. The relationship between effort and result is unfavorable. Success is a good thing – but if this success is achieved and the road to success feels good, that satisfies us even more.

We often find it difficult to describe the esthetics of our actions. The reason for that is that society sets “generally applicable” rules for esthetics that don’t conform to our own experiences. Children have no problem with that. They are happy if something feels good. As adults, we compare our feelings with the general norms, and in trying to measure up to these norms, we put ourselves under pressure.

**Our society sets “generally applicable” rules for esthetics
that don’t conform to our own experiences.**

If we connect with the experiences of felt esthetics we had as children, i.e. if we don’t focus on norms, this opens up a rich world of qualitative differences we can make use of. It is not about fulfilling any kind of standards. The smallest improvement of our well-being is one step away from unnecessary stress. Just like when you listen to a wonderful concert or eat a fine meal,

the satisfaction of the experience does not come from a high-contrast description of the ingredients but rather from the relationship of the ingredients to each other. In the same way, the relationship between stress and satisfaction can be experienced and co-controlled in every moment of your life. Stress that you create yourself can be reduced, and external stress is recognized and can be addressed in a dialog with those responsible for it.

The Embodied Stress Management exercises have been created to develop a world of experiences in felt esthetics. This way you will achieve a competence that will help you to recognize stress factors in all walks of life and to choose the behavior that is most energy-efficient for you in any given situation.

Dealing with the Moment

A moment isn't something that remains. The current moment will slip away over and over again. We constantly deal with memories and our future. That is a human quality. The current moment is nothing in which we linger. It is an event that we pass through again and again. The question is whether we can recognize it when we encounter this moment and if we can consciously experience it more often.

The current moment will slip away over and over again.

When we are troubled by stress and worries, we don't notice the current moment as often than we would like to. Actually, we want to do something – which we can only do in the present – but our emotions and worries dominate us.

There is no exclusive recipe for how to be consciously aware of the present moment. We can take anything we do as an opportunity to notice the present. That is why there is a multitude of methods that make it easier to become aware of the current moment:

Self-awareness while sitting still

Sitting still is a technique used in many forms of meditation. You follow your breath and let everything happen that occurs. But you don't let yourself be stopped by these things. Instead, you let them move on. As simple

as the starting point may be, the challenge is the process, which requires a great deal of patience and discipline.

Self-awareness while doing the “body scan”

The body scan is a guided journey through your body. Your focus is guided from one part of the body to the next. Becoming aware of your body usually leads to relaxation.

Self-awareness while carrying out conscious movements

Regulated forms of movement, such as yoga, tai-chi or chi gong, lead to the body becoming centered and have a positive effect on the vegetative nervous system. These techniques require good instructions and a longer period of practice until the user has internalized the processes. Beginners frequently concentrate more on carrying out the processes correctly than on being aware of them in the present moment.

Self-awareness while dancing or making music

Dancing and making music provide space for the present moment. Yet the complexity of these processes can also become a hurdle that stops you from dedicating yourself to the present moment.

Self-awareness while walking or running

For many people, walking, hiking, or running is a way to get their mind off things. The regular rhythm of moving can create a “flow” that allows you to sort of *become* the

movement. Since the nervous system quickly automates the rhythm, your thoughts can easily start to ramble again.

Self-awareness when carrying out micromoves

Small and simple movement sequences bind your attention to your body and the present moment without much effort. These micromoves make it possible for you to be aware of the most subtle differences, and this enables you to react early on when any stressful situation starts. Micromoves can be carried out in almost any daily situation. You stay alert and keep moving without others noticing it.

The Embodied Stress Management is built on micromoves.

Putting Theory into Practice

Would you also like to benefit from the ESM exercises?

You will receive the complete book with all the exercises and the access to the audio files online or at your local bookstore.

ISBN:

978-3-7345-3617-5 (Paperback)

978-3-7345-3618-2 (Hardcover)

978-3-7345-3619-9 (e-Book)

What's next ?

Now you have reached the end of the ESM exercise program. Maybe you participated in the program in the form of a live seminar or maybe you followed the instructions of the audio files or worked through this book.

Perhaps you felt that one or two specific exercises were particularly helpful to you. Use the exercises that appeal most to you and experiment with their micromoves. If you find yourself in a new and unforeseen stressful situation, however, it will be helpful to try the exercises you may find less appealing. These exercises are likely to illuminate any blind spots in your perception. But don't force yourself to do anything! That would only mean an additional moment of stress.

On Pages 126-127 you will find the micromoves listed for you to copy. Put these copies where you have easy access to them and do one or several micromoves on a regular basis.

ESM Seminars

The ESM Embodied Stress Management is also available as a 9-week seminar for companies. In these courses the ESM instructor specifically addresses the participants' concerns and accompanies them while dealing with their individual stress issues.

If you work in the fields of Human Resources, coaching or adult education, you can obtain training as an ESM instructor and subsequently be listed free of charge on the list of instructors under www.esm-stressmanagement.ch.

You may contact me under:

ergosens

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Your access to the mp3 audio files

In order to access the spoken audio files that accompany the ESM exercises, please register under:

www.esm-stressmanagement.ch/audio-files

and follow the instructions on how to get your password.

Literature

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About the author



Konrad Wiesendanger studied architecture at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich and worked as an urban planner and design architect. After an accident he discovered the Feldenkrais Method and was immediately fascinated by its approach for developing your personality with the aid of conscious movements.

He studied the Feldenkrais Method in New York with Russell Delman and Alan Questel as well as studying systemic coaching at the Zurich University of Applied Sciences. He runs his own practice of complementary therapy and coaching in Lucerne, Switzerland.

His experiences with space, movement, and organization led Konrad Wiesendanger to ergonomics consulting and therefore back to the business world, where in the past few years he has met an increasing number of stressed-out individuals on the verge of burnout.

And again, it was conscious movement that became the key for many people suffering from stress. Konrad Wiesendanger presents his experiences to the public for the first time in this book.

www.ergosens.ch

Escape the Stress Trap with Agile Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a good strategy to deal with stress. But how can we find mindfulness for ourselves when everything goes haywire?

ESM-Embodied Stress Management is an easy-to-understand method that allows you to observe yourself at precisely the moment when you experience stress and to then restore access to your 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 will smooth the edge of any unpleasant experience of stress.

“The ESM exercise program is a kind of accompanied research trip to ourselves. I recommend it to anyone interested in finding access to their inner resources and improving their well-being.”

Yvo Wüest, researcher and trainer in didactic reduction



Konrad Wiesendanger (*1958) has a master's degree in architecture and coaching and is a trained Feldenkrais practitioner. He lives in Lucerne (Switzerland) where he has been working as a therapist, coach and ergonomic consultant for 20 years. He teaches seminars on health promotion and ergonomics throughout Europe.



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