

## TRANSFORMATION

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### *Learning to kickback and relax is invaluable*

The ability to shift into a relaxed, calm, centred state of mind during the very moment you need it most is a valuable transformational skill. Being able to go from anxious, sad, frustrated to a calmer and more alert space is one of the most important skills to master. So many people I work with in psychotherapy feel compelled, driven, tense. In this state of mind, options are limited and regrets over what you say or do are common. This physical "stuck" experience can be better understood by taking a closer look at the human brain. It has an ancient physiological system to deal with danger, one that is present throughout the animal kingdom. This system is called the limbic brain - it's what instructs you to slam on the brake in the car when you see a cyclist cut in front of you. It reacts quickly, instinctively, with a rapid action. The limbic brain is a life-saving system. The downside is that in responding quickly and instinctively, it reacts to fear or danger with a rapid pre-programmed response. The human brain is unique in also having a more sophisticated operating system than the limbic system: the neo-cortex. This part of the brain allows us to speak, think rationally, plan strategies or anticipate dangerous, complex situations. These dangers are not necessarily related to physical threats to our lives but to perceived threats. Psychological concerns like a threat to our self-esteem or a fear that we will fail would also activate our stress response.

Unfortunately, our interpretation of reality is more important to the brain than what is actually going on in the outside world. For example, the threat that you may be embarrassed by speaking in public is just the kind of threat that gets the limbic system cooking and wanting an immediate decision. The limbic system thinks of the least dangerous option - avoidance seems like the right option. During these stressful moments your higher, creative brain shuts down except for taking orders from the limbic system - the specialist in danger situation solutions. This phenomenon has been described as downshifting. Downshifting is a fear situation during which the upper brain disconnects from the lower brain. The rational, intellectual and creative aspect of the upper

brain disconnects from the lower, more primitive part of the brain. In this state we do not use our higher functions to respond because they are unavailable to us at that moment. It is because of downshifting phenomena that stress-filled, overwhelming moments are so difficult to deal with - and it may be the cause of you repeating the same self-defeating behaviour. This downshifting phenomenon is part of the general stress response. The physical experience typically includes stiff neck muscles and tightening in many muscle groups of the body. It can also include holding your breath or shallow breathing. There is a general tightening of the joint surfaces of the body: facial tension, neck tension, jaw tension, shoulder tension, lower back tension, locked knees. What you need during these moments is the ability to shift out of this state and into a state that allows you to respond mindfully.

One of my favourite strategies is derived from Brain Gym, a series of tools used in schools to help students with learning disabilities. It can help to shift your brain to an optimum learning state. Try these Brain Gym® "smart moves" for releasing stress and realigning your brain for maximum efficiency:

- Begin by crossing your left ankle over your right.
- Hold both arms straight out in front of you, thumbs downward with palms facing out.
- Cross your right hand over your left hand and interlock your fingers.
- Turn the hands inward, bend your elbows, bring your interlocked hands to your chest, so that your fist rests on the upper chest.
- Place your tongue up against the roof of your mouth and breath through your nose.
- Take slow breaths and as you breath in push your tongue against the roof of your mouth.
- It is helpful to close your eyes and focus on the slow steady breathing.
- Now focus your attention on your toes while you are breathing, and imagine that you are breathing through your toes, in and out, in and out, in and out ....

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