

Stress Bytes Newsletter

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"WHEN STRESS BITES, BITE BACK!"

THE NEWSLETTER OF ANNETTE VAILLANCOURT, PH.D.
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The Secrets to Peak Performance

Lately psychologists have become interested in positive psychology and peak performance states, instead of just the study of mental illness and stress related problems. By studying human potential, instead of focusing solely on human frailty and illness, we get a perspective that suggests ways and techniques which expand and optimize human life, instead of just providing a form of damage control or remediation.

I recently returned from a workshop sponsored by Harvard Medical School and held at Esalen Institute in beautiful Big Sur, California. The title of the workshop was "Enhancing Peak Performance in Art, Sports, and the Worksite." What was new and interesting about the workshop was the addition of practices drawn directly from Eastern meditative practices. The presenter, Dr. Daniel Brown, had studied meditation in Tibet and Burma for 10 years and cited research studies on the abilities of advanced meditators.

In the West, we think of peak performance as episodic, the ability to do something, such as play a sport, at a high level for a limited amount of time. For example, as baseball player may have a hitting streak that eventually dies away or turns into the opposite of a peak performance, which would be a batting slump. The focus in the West is on the doing and the outcome.

The Eastern perspective considers peak performance as a state of Being in excellence all the time, i.e. in a state of mastery. Zen archers, who are masters of their sport because they are masters of themselves, would be an example of that.

It's interesting to look at the qualities of peak performance states, or being "in the zone" or in "flow." It is an effortless, joyful, intensely focused state of consciousness characterized by self-forgetting, moment by moment awareness, time and/or sensory distortion, a sense of total control of the situation, and the perfect match of skill and

challenge. Although you cannot make "flow" happen, you can increase the likelihood through training, preparation and self-discipline. The minimum requirements to achieve a peak performance state are the ability to 1) use a native talent, 2) focus one's attention and tune out distractions, 3) find a new challenge in the situation that "raises your game,"

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**"Success is where preparation and opportunity meet.
Failure is where they meet, but can't stand each other."**

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The Secrets a Peak Performance—cont'd

4) use mental imagery for rehearsal of optimal performance, 5) achieve the positive mental and calm emotional tone, 6) maintain a high level of motivation, and 7) be self-correcting.

Common blocks to peak performance include anxiety, negative self-talk, worry, self-limiting belief, low expectations and irrational beliefs, like “I can never win.” All of these blocks can be addressed through a variety of therapeutic techniques. Other aspects of preparation can be strengthened by techniques taken from hypnosis, mental imagery, and meditation practice, including training of concentration and awareness.

The contrast between how we in the West view peak performance and how it is viewed in the East was of primary interest to me, as it fell within a discipline he called “virtues of character and mind.” He described how many of our celebrity athletes, like a Kobe Bryant and movie stars, like Robert Downey, Jr., have amazing natural talent, that with training has been honed to a high level, but they lack the character and mental training that would allow them to have sustained a high level of performance over time. Consequently, they get into trouble with the law and jeopardize their careers. The star fades just as quickly as it had risen. The closest we have to the training of “virtues of character” in the West is Stephen Covey’s book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*.

What are these “virtues of character and mind” that differentiate the highly talented peak performers from the true master and how can we learn them? Here’s a partial list culled for multiple sources: trust, courage, commitment, sense of purpose, light-heartedness, curiosity, generosity of spirit, patience, equanimity, resourcefulness, integrity, humility, empathy, compassion, honesty, loving kindness, and self-efficacy. Sounds like all the qualities we’re supposed to develop from spiritual practices, doesn’t it? Obviously these character virtues don’t happen over night, but the good news is that they can be cultivated with perseverance and self-discipline.

Dr. Brown said that in Tibetan culture the main way to cultivate these virtues of mind is through visualization. Here’s an exercise he suggested. Try coming up with an ideal role model or person who you think poses or exemplifies a desire virtue or strength you wish to acquire. Perhaps, you want to cultivate humility and you use Mother Theresa as your role model. Using imagery, get into a relaxed state and mentally bring that person before you until you can feel their presence. Then imagine a scene or activity where this person is manifesting this quality as their strength. Observe what they are doing. Then imagine them in a different situation manifesting the same strength. Again, observe what they are doing. Now imagine that quality is placed in a bubble of light that floats towards you, hovers over your head and slowly descends into your body and moves down from your head to stop in your heart. Feel that bubble of light filled with that wonderful quality burst open and spread in all directions from within your heart. You become that quality. Then imagine yourself in different life scenes having this strength and manifesting this quality.

It’s exciting me to learn about what is possible and what abilities can be expanded through the use of psychological

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Have You Experienced “Flow”?

Psychologist Mihály Csikszentmihályi’s book, **Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience**, outlined the characteristics of a state of “flow” - a Zen-like state of total oneness with the activity at hand and the situation. The idea of flow is identical to the feeling of being in the zone or in the groove. The flow state is an optimal state of intrinsic motivation, where the person is fully immersed in what he or she is doing.

Think of an activity that challenges you, yet absorbs your complete attention. It could be from sports, work, a hobby, or caring for your family.

Focusing on this activity, rate the following statements that apply to you when you are performing this activity. Please note, not all are needed for flow to be experienced.

For the activity of _____

- Yes No I have clear goals.
- Yes No My goals are attainable.
- Yes No I have the skills and abilities to meet my goal.
- Yes No I have the ability to focus a high degree of concentration on an activity without being easily distracted.
- Yes No I have the ability to lose a feeling of self-consciousness when I immerse myself in an activity.
- Yes No I sometimes feel like my sense of time is distorted (moving faster or slower) when I’m focused on something I enjoy doing.
- Yes No I have the ability to adjust my behavior as needed, based on the direct and immediate feedback during an activity.
- Yes No My goals involve just the right balance between my ability level and the level of challenge, i.e. the activity is neither too easy nor too difficult.
- Yes No I feel a sense of personal control over the situation or activity.
- Yes No I find this activity is intrinsically rewarding, so there is an effortlessness of action.
- Yes No I often get totally absorbed in the activity, losing awareness of everything else, except what I’m doing.

Obviously the more of these you checked “yes” the more likely you’ve experienced a state of “flow.”

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The Stress Doctor is IN!!!

“GOOD HABITS, WHICH BRING OUR LOWER PASSIONS AND APPETITES UNDER AUTOMATIC CONTROL, LEAVE OUR NATURES FREE TO EXPLORE THE LARGER EXPERIENCES OF LIFE.”

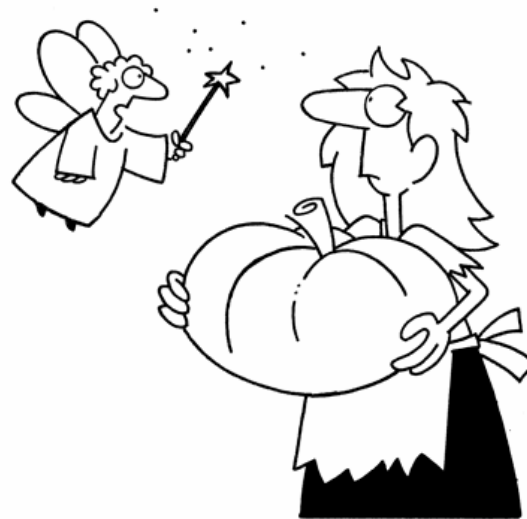
RALPH W. SOCKMAN

“A LARGE PART OF VIRTUE CONSISTS IN GOOD HABITS.”

WILLIAM PALEY

“THERE IS NOTHING SADDER IN THIS WORLD THAN THE WASTE OF HUMAN POTENTIAL. THE PURPOSE OF EVOLUTION IS TO RAISE US OUT OF THE MUD, NOT HAVE US GROVELLING IN IT.”

DIANE FROLOV AND
ANDREW SCHNEIDER



“Cinderella, I’m going to rescue you by turning that pumpkin into a coach — a success coach!”

ANNETTE VAILLANCOURT, PH.D.

LICENSED CLINICAL PROFESSIONAL COUNSELOR

- 17 years experience gently helping individuals, couples and groups resolve personal problems, manage stress, and reach their full potential.
- Specializing in Women’s Issues and Stress Management
- Emotional Freedom Technique for Peak Performance

Call (618) 549-5935 to set up an appointment

Seven Habits of Highly Effective People

The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change was a groundbreaker when it was first published in 1990, and it continues to be a business bestseller with more than 10 million copies sold. Stephen Covey, an internationally respected leadership authority, realizes that true success encompasses a balance of personal and professional effectiveness, so this book is a manual for performing better in both arenas. His anecdotes are as frequently from family situations as from business challenges.

Before you can adopt the seven habits, you'll need to accomplish what Covey calls a "paradigm shift"--a change in perception and interpretation of how the world works. Covey takes you through this change, which affects how you perceive and act regarding productivity, time management, positive thinking, developing your "proactive muscles" (acting with initiative rather than reacting), and much more.

This isn't a quick-tips-start-tomorrow kind of book. The concepts are sometimes intricate, and you'll want to study this book, not skim it. When you finish, you'll probably have Post-it notes or hand-written annotations in every chapter, and you'll feel like you've taken a powerful seminar by Covey. --Joan Price --from Editorial Review on www.Amazon.com