

The Practice of Unwinding with the Birds.

There is no denying that we are living in stressful times. Trade wars, environmental revolts, discrimination, refugees, decay of moral values, global indifference and now a worldwide plague!

It seems that we turned a blind eye to all that is happening and that we all thought we would be fine. Some might still say this, but there is no denying that the sickness of the soil, the water, the air and all forms of life is somehow related to our throwaway culture and way of life.

We are all so stressed out that it seems to me that we have lost our sense of awareness and connection to all things and to each other.



We need to relearn how to live wisely, think deeply and love generously amongst this age of information overload.

Personally, I need to admit that I am a pretty cranked up and tense person. The good thing is that I have a lot of energy. But the dark side of that is that it comes with its share of stress and anxiety.

In fact, research shows that too much stress can damage your brain and body. Cortisol is known to be a stress hormone, and during phases of fight or flight, it is secreted at high levels. This hormone causes higher blood pressure, lowered immunity, and decreased muscle tissue and bone density; it also kills cells in the hippocampus, the brain's processing center for your memory and emotions, and it increases abdominal fat.

Learning how to decrease these dangerous levels of stress hormones is vital to a healthy lifestyle.

This is all great but how do you do it? How can we decrease these toxic levels of stress in our lives?

Many say that meditation helps as it has been shown to decrease cortisol levels, boost blood flow to the front of the brain and raises progesterone levels. Progesterone being the brain's natural Valium—it calms and soothes the brain. If it gets too low, you feel anxious, tense, and nervous. I can certainly vouch for that.

Meditation is certainly good for us but honestly, I have tried it and this practice is very difficult for me. I needed to find something to unwind, to loosen up my mind and body from this otherwise coiled condition.

The best practice I have found so far to relax is what I call “**Unwinding with the birds**”.

Here is how I do it:

1. I go outside and sit down in a comfortable chair on my deck that faces my bird feeders.
2. I close my eyes for 5 seconds and all I can hear is the sound of the birds. Nature's symphony takes over in my mind of all other sounds that are out there.
3. I then open my eyes and look at the birds. Flying from feeder to feeder. From the ground up to the feeder, to a nearby branch. Taking turns, one after the other.
4. Suddenly, the sight and the sounds of the birds seem to take over all my awareness.
5. My mind clears up of any other thought without effort and:
 - ✓ all I am hearing right now,
 - ✓ all that am I seeing right now,
 - ✓ all that I am sensing right now,
 - ❖ is the peace and joy of nature through the birds.
6. I try to simply attend what is going on, at this moment.
7. I don't try to analyze it, interpret it, judge it or figure it out. I simply enjoy it. This wonderful feeling of peace and joy is all that is, right there, right now.
8. I am in the present moment, at peace.

In this way, nature comforts me through all my senses. Through this, I feel a mutual connection with the birds, with nature and the earth, as if we are all parts of an ordered system.

Nature in this way is a magnificent book which speaks to us and grants us a glimpse of its infinite beauty and goodness. The key is that for me, my “Unwinding with the birds” moment, does not just help me unwind, it makes me feel better, happier, relaxed and peaceful.

Some people will refer to this as **Mindfulness**. I see it as “mindfulness with benefits.”

The science of this is that the cascade of stress hormones that I mentioned earlier come from what has been referred to as the “fight-or-flight” response.

This fight-or-flight response is programmed within all of us and other mammals as a survival mechanism, enabling to react quickly to life-threatening situations. The carefully orchestrated yet near-instantaneous sequence of hormonal changes and physiological responses help someone to fight the threat off or flee to safety.

Unfortunately, the body can also overreact to stressors that are not life-threatening, such as traffic jams, work pressure, watching the news, and family difficulties. Over the years, researchers have learned not only how and why these reactions occur but have also gained insight into the long-term effects chronic stress has on physical and psychological health. It is not good.

The truth of it is that there are not so many sabre-toothed tigers out there, ready to pounce on us. Such dangerous, "life-threatening situations" that warrant us to fight or run for our lives are quite rare, if not nonexistent in our typical day. Yet the stress response happens. It happens to me and I am certain it happens to you as well. Why is that?

It is because we activate the stress response when **we send our minds into the future or the past** and include threat thoughts into the mix of those future or past thoughts.

Our stress response is activated by worrying and regrets. Worrying about the future and having regrets about the past.

Worrying, involves thinking of a future event and including a painful scenario that we **imagine** as the outcome. Regret is essentially doing the same thing but in the opposite direction, beating ourselves up about the past, when really **nothing can change** what has already happened.

When we become **Mindful**, we think differently. We bring our mental focus directly on our current here-and-now experience. We observe the mental data we are receiving. We focus wholly on this moment, right here, right now.

The Father of American Psychology William James said that "the greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another." But really, that is not that easy. If you are like me that "mental chatter" can get pretty loud and once the emotions get a hold of you, you are done.

This is why **most people need some help to control their thoughts and to be Mindful.** The best help I have found so far is the help provided by watching birds and taking in nature.

Try it, and I know you will experience a movement of warming affection in your heart.

The patron of the environment, Saint Francis, would probably say my brother and sister birds will bring you joy and an interior peace that will comfort you and change your heart. We are, indeed, all mutually connected by the inseparable bond of nature.

So, try my "**unwinding with the birds**" technique. Follow my 8 steps or adapt them for yourself. For me, it is a wonderful daily practice and does me a world of good.

It might not change the world, but it will change your heart and bring you great consolation, hope and inner peace.

Take care,

Denis Malaket, MBA

President

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