



Mind Over Body

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I woke up in a panic 10 minutes before my first class. Grabbing the phone to call my students, I ran through the house gathering what I would need... both types of insulin, needles, strips, meter, food. I grabbed the cooler, ice packs. "I'll be a little late, I'm on my way."

Thirty minutes later, adrenaline rushing, I ran from the car to the studio. Within 10 minutes I was grinning, tension rolling off, body relaxing, feeling very good. Once again, I was in awe of and grateful for the ability to go from high gear to mellow in a matter of minutes. How did I do it? I am no guru or mystic with unusual abilities. Reality is that everyone has the ability to use their mind to control their body. Just as I used my mind when I overslept to tell my body to MOVE FAST, I can use my mind to tell my body to STOP MOVING FAST..

Adam Smith's "Powers of the Mind," (1975) and Herbert Benson's "The Relaxation Response" (1978) first triggered my interest in the power of the mind/body connection. It is a major part of what I now teach my students.

The effort to develop these skills is minimal in theory. What are the steps?

Step #1: Give yourself permission to truly relax: physically, mentally and emotionally. Be gentle with yourself, letting go for just a short time of the tasks you feel you have to accomplish that day.

That sounds simpler than it is. Relaxing mentally and emotionally requires letting go of all the "stuff" that we are mulling over in our brains, responsibilities, problems that we are solving. The mind controls the body, whether consciously or unconsciously.

Step #2: Establish a mind/body connection with simple relaxing movements reinforced with thoughts.

The movements I teach my students are basic Qigong and Sun Style Tai Chi Short Form. A primary key is to "say" in your head, "Inhale, Exhale, Relax." As you exhale and repeat in your head "relax," set your intention for your joints and muscles to relax and let go of the tension that they are holding. I go through a series of movements in my classes. Below is a simple starter movement that anyone can do on their own.

Stand with your feet shoulder width apart, weight evenly distributed, hands/arms hanging at your sides. Knees are relaxed (not locked back). Your spine is perpendicular to gravity, shoulders over hips, feet pointed straight out.

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Visualize a string at the top of your head - like a plumb line with you as the weight. You are hanging from that string, joints relaxing and opening.

As you inhale, turn your palms to face upward and bring them to chest level.

As you exhale, say “relax” in your head, turn your palms down and slowly return them to your side.

Move very very slowly and pay particular attention to your shoulders, neck, arms. Pretend you are moving through a cloud or water, with a slight resistance. Focus on relaxing; your body will find its own comfortable stance. Continue the up and down movement, allowing yourself to relax, moving slower and slower and repeating “inhale, exhale, relax.”

Step #3. Practice.

While I do not know the physiological reason for it, I do know for a fact that the body develops a type of “memory.” The idea is to let your body feel relaxed and practice a short while every day. Eventually, when your mind says “inhale, exhale, relax” your body will respond, going into the relaxed state it feels when you practice. I have had students who do this while they are at the office waiting for the copier, standing in line at the grocery store, in the middle of a stressful situation.

Adding mellow music to your practice can be very powerful. I always use music in my classes. You can also practice outside, under a tree, by the water. You may feel some wonderful tingles or warmth as you release the tension. Let yourself feel peaceful and calm. Our bodies have an amazing ability to renew themselves, but they need to be relaxed in order to do that. Many of my students are amazed that they can feel both relaxed and energized after a class.

As you go through your day, be aware of tensing up, especially shoulders and neck. When you are tense and your shoulders are up by your ears, mentally tell them to relax!

Realize that your mind sends signals down your spine, the electrical impulses that travel by way of neurons to your body parts. Controlling your mind, what you are thinking/focusing on - can control your body's actions/reactions. Start to pay attention.

It doesn't take special ability or talent to develop the mind/body connection. Learn how to use your mind to enhance relaxation. How you think and react in your mind truly does impact your physical state. By recognizing the unconscious signals that cause negative physical reactions, one can learn to counter them to create a positive state of being.

All human beings are blessed with the ability to use their mind to enhance physical, mental and emotional health. Simple movements and intentional focus can add up to powerful positive tools to de-stress and relax.

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