
The Beacon

Guiding You Through the Process of Change

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The Harmonious Heart

People often experience high levels of psychological and physical tension as a result of the demands of everyday life. Stressors such as a difficult work environment, financial strain, and conflicted family relationships, among others, can cause significant distress in the mind and body.

All of us encounter stressful situations from time to time. However, if the stressors are particularly severe or unrelenting, or an individual is particularly vulnerable, the human machine can begin to wear down. This can be associated with psychological distress, including such impacts as disrupted sleep or poor concentration at work, physical discomforts such as headaches or upset stomach, and even more serious physical ills such as high blood pressure and increased risk of heart disease.

Biofeedback-assisted relaxation training is a treatment technique that can help overly stressed individuals learn to reduce high levels of tension, leading to a more relaxed, comfortable lifestyle, and improved health. Let's examine this approach:

Relaxation training is based on the idea that people can be trained or guided to develop the skills necessary to relax their minds and bodies, and thus reduce excessive and harmful levels of stress and tension.

Biofeedback refers to a device which measures some aspect of a person's bodily function, which would otherwise be unknown (or only vaguely understood), and *feeds* this information, using visual and/or auditory signals, *back* to the person. In a psychologist's office, biofeedback is often used to measure and assist in

modifying bodily functions that are associated with excessive tension. Muscle tension or contraction is commonly measured for this purpose. As people learn to let go of tension in their muscles, they feel less stressed and more in control of their reactions to difficult situations.

At Beacon, I have begun using a small, portable biofeedback device that measures **heart rate variability or HRV**. HRV refers to a slight increase in heart rate that occurs when we breathe in, and a relative decrease in heart rate that occurs as we breathe out. While the thought of experiencing variability in one's heart rate might be unsettling, HRV is actually a good thing! Appropriate levels of HRV indicate a nice balance in the body between the sympathetic nervous system, which is associated with arousal, and the parasympathetic nervous system, which is associated with relaxation. This relaxed, harmonious rhythm between one's breathing and heart rate has been called "**coherence**" and it is associated with greater emotional stability, effective stress coping, and improved health. On the other hand, people who are excessively stressed do not show good levels of HRV or coherence. Their breathing and heart rate are not working in well-coordinated rhythm. Low HRV or low coherence has been found to be associated with anxiety and depression, as well as heart disease, chronic pain, and a variety of other medical conditions.

Using slow, rhythmic breathing, and other relaxation techniques, people can learn to increase their HRV, inducing a state of deep relaxation and bringing their heart rate and breathing into harmony, which is confirmed and reinforced by the biofeedback device. Since HRV and coherence cannot actually be felt by most people, the

biofeedback device has a critical role in helping us learn to control this important indicator of stress and tension.

Thus, using HRV biofeedback to achieve higher levels of coherence between one's breathing and heart rhythms appears to have excellent potential as an additional treatment for anxiety, depression and other mental health

conditions, as well as for improving one's stress coping, overall health, and sense of wellness.

Additional resources: www.heartmath.com, or www.stresseraser.com

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