

Self-Care in Times of Anxiety or Crisis

Listening to Your Body

Melissa Moody

Anxiety affects the body. Acute and prolonged stress, if not mindfully addressed, lowers the immune system and places strain on the function of all of our body systems. Intense emotion, fear, anxiety, anger, etc. contracts the body, constricting circulation, tightening muscles and eventually impinging nerve tracks and constricting joint space. The “fight, flight or freeze” sympathetic nervous system is chronically stimulated. Optimal function of most body systems is restricted, and eventually something breaks down. You become vulnerable, often to the very thing you want to avoid: postural, muscle, nerve or joint issues and illness.

Paying attention and noticing situational and emotional impact in the body, and working to release and soften, can help keep us healthy in times of crisis, physically and emotionally.

Notice how emotions affect your body (tightness, tension, knots, etc.) Become aware of your own psycho/emotional “triggers” from unresolved trauma or issues needing further attention (your emotional reactions to event/person e.g. intense frustration, fear, irritation, etc.). If the level of your emotion seems more intense for the current situation, you are undoubtedly holding still unresolved body memory of grief, fear, rage. Often, the earlier (the younger you were) when the incident(s) occurred, the deeper entrenched the “trapped” emotions are.

When you react, or are triggered, “follow the threads”- explore the underlying messages and what you really feel-where do they come from? What is the underlying implication? Acknowledge, grieve with self-compassion. Explore and acknowledge this and meet it with compassion for yourself. Send love to you. Journal or share experiences with a supportive person. Releasing body memory allows better presence today.

Pay attention to your body response to anxiety and circumstances: Are you tense? Where? Is your gut knotted? Jaw tense? How are you breathing? Practice these “stress buster” techniques throughout the day. Working with the physical in awareness is just as important as working with the emotions and mind in maintaining and building health.

Notice your breathing, is it shallow and rapid? Are you holding your breath? Shallow and/or rapid breathing triggers the sympathetic autonomic nervous system (fight or flight)

Breathe 2 or 3 breaths; through your belly (place your hands on your belly and feel it rise and fall. It may take some practice, but this better oxygenates the lungs and blood), exhaling longer than you inhale, slowing the breath down. This triggers the brain to move the body into the parasympathetic autonomic nervous system (rest & digest, everything ok.)

Inhaling imagine & allowing your body to expand in all directions (crown of head moving toward sky, shoulders, rib cage & hips widening, and spine lengthening, etc.) and soften with each breath.

Exhaling letting go. Exhale longer than you inhale by at least 2 counts. Layers and layers of letting go.

Feel the tension- in your face, your neck, your shoulders, your gut.

Bring your awareness to the area and soften, imagine the tension softening at the edges, letting the tension go, or allow it to float in softness (eyes closed or open, whichever is easier for you). Slowly bring your awareness to your belly and notice how it feels. Soften the belly. Soften the edges. Imagine the knots

softening and dissolving. Let any remaining tension float in softness. The whole body will relax and soften. Tune into your belly throughout the day and continue to soften it and breathe.

Move -keep your circulation moving.

Dance, do Yoga, stretch, exercise. Walk outside if possible (or look out a window) and look in the far distance, blink and breathe.

Move every joint (that moves) in a circle, a rotational movement in both directions, lubricating the joints, engaging all the muscles, stimulating circulation. If it is “jerky” or “crunchy” stop and imagine moving it in a circle and imagine it is smooth and effortless and then try again. Any better? Practice over and over from time to time until the circles are smooth. Then do it regularly. Keep your joints healthy.

Notice your jaw. Is it tight? Do you clench at night or in the day?

Slightly open and relax the jaw, make micro side-to-side movements. Tap on your cheeks and massage the face. Soften, be mindful and let go. Tension in the jaw impacts, the neck, the shoulders, the skull, creates tension in the face and reduces circulation (and can cause dental issues!)

Notice your hands. In repose are they open or are they closed?

Open them. Notice how you are typing, or holding the remote, or holding the steering wheel. Clenched? Fingers tight? Wiggle your fingers. Soften. Let go.

Notice your toes. Do you “hold” with your toes? Clench on those flip flops? Let go. Be mindful.

Notice how you are standing or sitting. Are you hunched? Arms crossed in front of your chest?

Let go. Adopt a more relaxed and loose manner. If you must hold your hands or arms, hold them behind your back, opening the chest.

Quick Release for Neck and Shoulder Tension

Gently move your head laterally from side to side (look over your shoulder) as far as you can and notice how it feels. Next, move your head in a circle (eyes open or closed), and notice how it feels.

Move your head in a circle again, in both directions. Notice if your jaw is tight. Slightly open your mouth. Try not to engage your neck when you rotate your head; make circle smaller if necessary. Rotate your head 5 times each direction. Move your head from side to side and notice if it seems easier.

Now, turn your head as far as you can, looking over the opposite shoulder. With that hand, tap the opposite shoulder (the one not engaged), from the shoulder tip to the ear and back. Squeeze the muscles, too. Turn your head and look over the other shoulder and do the same thing. Now, tuck your chin as far as you can and tap the back of your neck and the base of your skull with your fingers. Always notice your jaw; open it slightly to release the tension. Move your head in a circle again several times in each direction. Is it easier than the first time? Move your head side to side. Is it easier?

Next, move *one* shoulder (think shoulder tip) in a rotating motion several times in each direction. (*If you have time and space- add this: Extend your arm fully and move in as big a circle as possible within your comfort level. Move in both directions several times. Now rotate your shoulder again. Is it easier?) Now move the other shoulder several times in a full circle in each direction. Move your head from side to side again and note if it is easier.

Make micro-circles with your head in both directions and with each shoulder.

Deep self-massage: With your back to the wall, place 2 tennis balls on each side of the spine. Bend your knees and move up and down, moderating the pressure on the balls, releasing tension in the upper back. Roll one tennis ball under one foot at a time, while standing, to release whole body tension.

Rest for the eyes: Palm your eyes- Darken the room and position yourself for maximal comfort with your elbows supported (you can use pillows etc. on or a table) with your spine more or less straight. Warm your hands by rubbing them together and drop your shoulders. Close your eyes. Gently cover the orbits with your cupped hands without pressing on your eyes (the heel of each hand rests on a cheekbone with minimal pressure). Breathe deeply and slowly. Regular daily brief 30 seconds – 6 minutes sessions and a 15- to 20-minute session (if possible) relieves eyestrain. Listen to nurturing music or an engaging book.

Blink (most of us do not blink frequently enough- especially if we are tense or focused) For a few minutes think of blinking like butterfly wings and then like hummingbird wings, then butterfly wings again, and then blink naturally. Blinking releases tension in the face and nurtures the eyes.

Smile- studies suggest the physical act of smiling messages the brain to release endorphins.

Maintain a healthy diet. Lots of vegetables and fruit. Think colorful!

Obtain regular and adequate sleep. If you are having trouble sleeping, practice the breathing exercises above or listen to a guided meditation.

Connect with others, even virtually online.

Reach out and help someone; offer help or even just a smile.

Practice gratitude. Often think of something/someone to be grateful for and give thanks.

Develop mindfulness, compassion (for self and others) and regular reflection.

Meditate, pray, commune with nature, the universe.

Pay attention to how you feel; periodically monitor and notice your body, emotions and mental well-being. Before symptoms exacerbate, employ renewal and self-care skills. We can choose to become aware and learn how to respond to crises as healthily as possible. Do all you can. Be wise. Take care of yourself. And soften the body and heart. You will be able to be more present to deal with current situations.

Inner peace ultimately lies in coming to terms with and accepting the vulnerability inherent in life with people, the environment & circumstances; integrating this truth with courage and compassion (for self and others) and making a choice to remember that every day and moment is new.

Please feel free to contact me for more handouts and support.

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About Melissa Moody: Completely run over by a truck, Melissa suffered massive injuries including a crushed face (over 100 fractures), facial disfigurement, traumatic brain injury, PTSD (post traumatic syndrome disorder), vision problems, relentless pain and complex musculo-skeletal damage. After more than 30 surgeries over 8 years to reconstruct her face, and a profound journey to heal her body, soul and psyche, she helps others find inner peace, and maximize function of the body and eyes. She teaches and shares what has helped her heal, combining craniosacral therapy, somatoemotional release therapies, gentle movement exercises, vision exercises, Syntonic phototherapy, self-massage, visualization, breath work, myofascial release, neurological re-training and trauma work, according to client need moment to moment. Clients develop awareness to the subtle effects of movement and restriction in the body and eyes, as well as inner psycho/emotional awareness, and the connection between them, helping them to listen to their body and eyes at the many levels of its communication, creating an intuitive and powerful approach for health. "Heartful Healing." Part of Melissa's story is profiled in the documentary HAPPY, available online. She appears in the documentary "Vision 2020: From Eyesight to Insight" to be released later in 2020.