

## **A Joyful Life**

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We all notice that we have an energy level that fluctuates up and down like a fountain, and we have a tension level that also fluctuates up and down. The word, "happy", describes how we feel when energy is greater than tension.

We can have lots of tension, but if energy is higher, we can handle it, and may even welcome stressors as challenges.

We can have low energy, but if tension is lower, we can rest in a peaceful, quiet happiness.

So the way to live happily is this: to think habitually of raising energy and lowering tension.

## **Giving Advice**

There has always been a lot of advice about how to live and what to do, but really, we all do the best we can with the energy/tension state we have.

- In a high-energy/low-tension state, we are naturally cheerful, optimistic, forgiving, patient, grateful, and compassionate; we think clearly, calmly, courageously, and creatively; work and relationships go well; and life seems very simple.
- In a low-energy/high-tension state, it feels like something is wrong, or missing, and needs to be fixed or found, and we try to make things happen, but no matter how much we do, it's never enough, and this makes us anxious, critical, needy, impatient, controlling, self-centered, in a hurry, and tired, and we dream of being heroes or of being rescued; thinking is worried and repetitive, and we drift into addictions; work and relationships are a struggle; and life seems very complicated.

These are not moral qualities or character traits; they're directional signs of where we are on the energy-tension scale, navigational features of the landscape. Seeing this, we become less interested in analyzing and judging ourselves and others and more interested in helping ourselves and others to lower tension and raise energy.

## **Human nature: self-centered or altruistic?**

It's a law that "attention goes to trouble." This has obvious survival value, but it also means that a person in a low-energy/high-tension state will necessarily have their attention in on themselves where the trouble is. And when that state is chronic, then attention is chronically inward, and the person becomes known as self-centered. When

that person moves to a high-energy/low-tension state, the trouble is gone, and then attention naturally turns outward, and the person becomes more altruistic. If there seems to be so little altruism in the world, it's because there's so much tension and tiredness, and because most of us are so unaware of how much tension we're used to carrying in our bodies and how accustomed we've become to being tired.

It's the same with arrogance and humility, greed and generosity -- not moral qualities or character traits, but signs of where we are on the energy/tension scale. And the same with other polar opposites: anxiety and serenity; criticism and appreciation; depression and delight; fear and trust; anger and forgiveness; judgment and compassion -- not things to blame or pride ourselves and others for, but signals of the energy/tension balance. Without changing that balance, we can will ourselves to make changes in short bursts, but we don't sustain them.

### **Morality**

This is why moralizing at the level of "you should" or "I wish you would" has always been, in the long run, so pitifully ineffective, like preaching into a hole in the ground, and it's why people resent it so much and sometimes rebel, or alternately, why we feel guilty and get discouraged and decide that human nature is just weak and unable to change very much (which is not true).

The same for self-moralizing and our efforts at self-improvement that lead us into striving and struggle and often then to disappointment. All the resolutions and promises we make to ourselves to improve our lives depend on energy being greater than tension. When it is, we come through. When it isn't, we don't.

Changing the energy/tension balance, though, brings instant results. The body-mind does not need to be controlled; it needs to be comforted -- relaxed and energized. As tensions melt and energy grows, all the things we "should" do -- love, hope, share, forgive, help out, be patient, give thanks, rejoice, celebrate -- come naturally, spontaneously, easily, effortlessly, constantly. And all the things we "should not" do seldom even occur to us.

### **Personality**

Some of us live in a fairly steady state on the energy/tension scale, and we think this is our personality, character, identity, fate, or "just the way life is" and what we have to struggle with, and we develop a philosophy of life that features the kinds of Certainties that appear at that place on the scale.

Others of us have big swings in energy and tension, and we're never quite sure who we really are, and we develop a philosophy of life that features Change and how you can never be too sure of anything.

Who we all are is the potential for all of it depending on our energy/tension state. We all have the potential to live in peace, love, and joy.

The energy/tension state is what determines our mood and our attitude, which is what determines our every thought and feeling, which is what determines our every speech and action. And everything in the fields of recovery and rehabilitation and healing, and everything in the fields of clinical psychology and criminal law and ethics and pastoral care that works, works because it raises energy and/or lowers tension. Seeing this gives us a clear focus on how to proceed.

### **What We Can Do to Manage Tension and Energy.**

#### 1. Some things we can do immediately:

- we can breathe deep and free and easy.
- we can sit, stand, or walk in a balanced way that minimizes tension.
- we can relax the muscles in our face, shoulders, etc.; we can stretch and yawn (fear is just tension -- no tension, no fear; and tension is just frozen energy).
- we can laugh at whatever we were taking too seriously such as My opinions, My plans, My schedule for when everything should happen, etc. (laughter releases tension in the abdomen and shoulders).
- we can smile, which releases endorphins (even when the smile is faked).
- we can cut our list of things to do; we can do just one thing at a time.
- we can contact our Higher Power and let go and turn something over and feel the relief; rhythmic silent prayer, along with smiling and deep, easy breathing, can be very calming and energizing.

#### 2. Some things we can do daily:

- we can take time out to renew.
- we can find or create a safe place to release emotional tensions so we don't store them up and become emotionally reactive.
- we can exercise in a way and for a time that energizes and relaxes us for hours afterward.
- we can eat the foods that deliver a calm, lasting energy (taking with a grain of salt the one-size-fits-all diets; experimenting to find what foods fit us personally).
- we can find music, books, radio, TV, and movies that relax or energize (not listen to, read, or watch tensors and drainers just because everyone else is).

#### 3. Some things are more long term:

- we can begin insisting that home be a safe place, a place where we consistently compliment and thank and encourage one another, a place where it's safe to relax deeply (if it's not safe to relax deeply at home, it's not a home).
- the same with friends -- positive, loving, encouraging people.
- we can find work that gives back more than it takes.

- we can concentrate on doing just a few things, and doing them really well.
- we can explore different approaches to preventive health care.
- we can work toward more beauty and order in our environment.

There are thousands of ways to energize and relax -- mental, physical, emotional, spiritual, social, artistic, musical -- and we are all smart enough to find our own ways, especially when we have encouraging friends who will listen with love and not analyze or criticize or give advice as we talk our way through the problems.

Anyone can do this. Many of us begin by charting our personal energy/tension ecology, listing what in our lives drains and what lifts energy, what raises and what lowers tension -- and what ever has or might. Then we start to make changes. Even a little can make a big difference.

The ability to raise energy and drop tension, and thus to lift mood and attitude and create happiness, grows with practice. There is no limit on the number of people who can live happily, and no limit on how happy each of us can be.

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