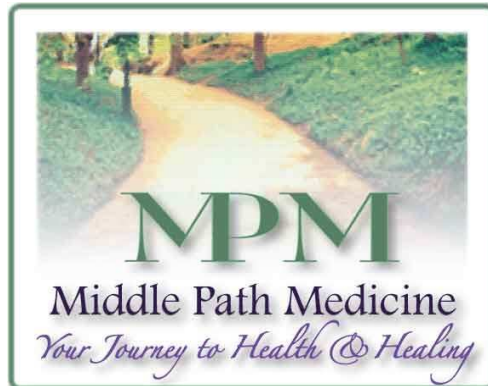


Stress Management Series Parts 1-5



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The Stress Management Series

Part I

“What is Stress After All?”

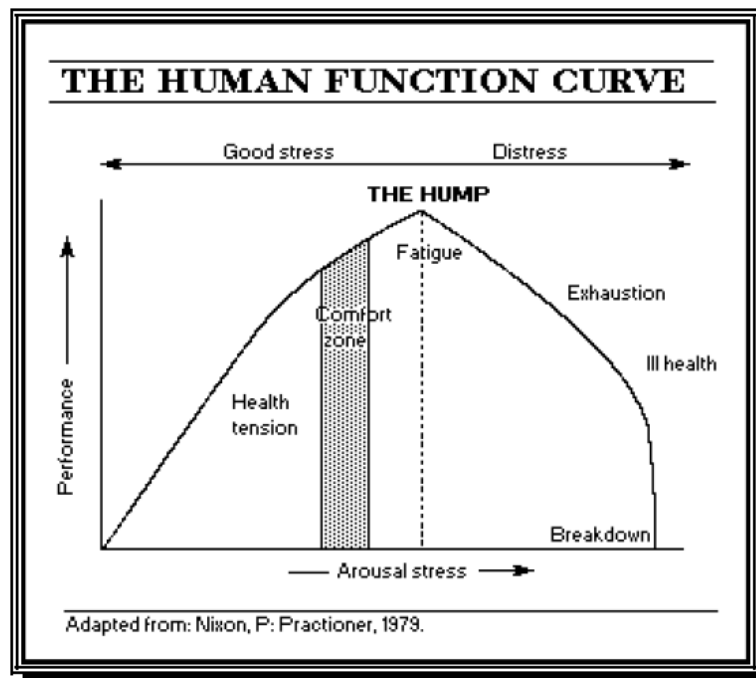
Gary E Foresman MD

April 2011

This educational series is my attempt to clarify some salient issues involved with defining, understanding, and treating what is commonly known as “stress”. I am in a unique position as a physician and meditation instructor to define and give context to this truly modern-day epidemic. So we will begin by simply defining stress, or, perhaps more importantly, does stress define us?

Stress may be defined as any **threat**, real or perceived, external or internal. Let me define a **real threat** as a toxin, poison, or physical incident where perception plays a smaller role and adverse physiologic events proceed in a stereotyped fashion for nearly everyone exposed. Let me define a **perceived threat** as things such as relationships and emotions where our perception of them plays a much larger role in determining if the condition threatens.

Now, many of you may delineate between “good” and “bad” stress, yet we know that the physiologic consequences of a marriage and a divorce are quite similar. Finding and losing a job are also similarly stressful. So then it is the perception of an event, external or internal, which leads to a cascade of chemical changes meant to help ready our bodies to battle this threat. These changes most typically involve the **fight or flight** response meant to help us kill or prevent ourselves from being killed. That same stress can improve function can be graphically represented in Figure 1:



An **event** can be a thought or a memory, indeed our own intellects may, on many levels, be our greatest threat to our own survival! An event may be a phone call, a creditor, or a cranky bank teller. An event may be a lion or tiger or bear. What happens to us physiologically when these **threats** invade our day? Many key determinants play a role in our preparedness for any of these

events. Knowledge, experience, and many physiologic factors will immediately tell *you* whether the event threatens. The subsequent physiologic cascade solely depends on your perception (conscious and subconscious) when it comes to psychological threats and, to a lesser extent, when it comes to physiological threats. The next two figures demonstrate the autonomic response to perceived and real threats; note how dramatically the “self” plays a role in response to those threats:

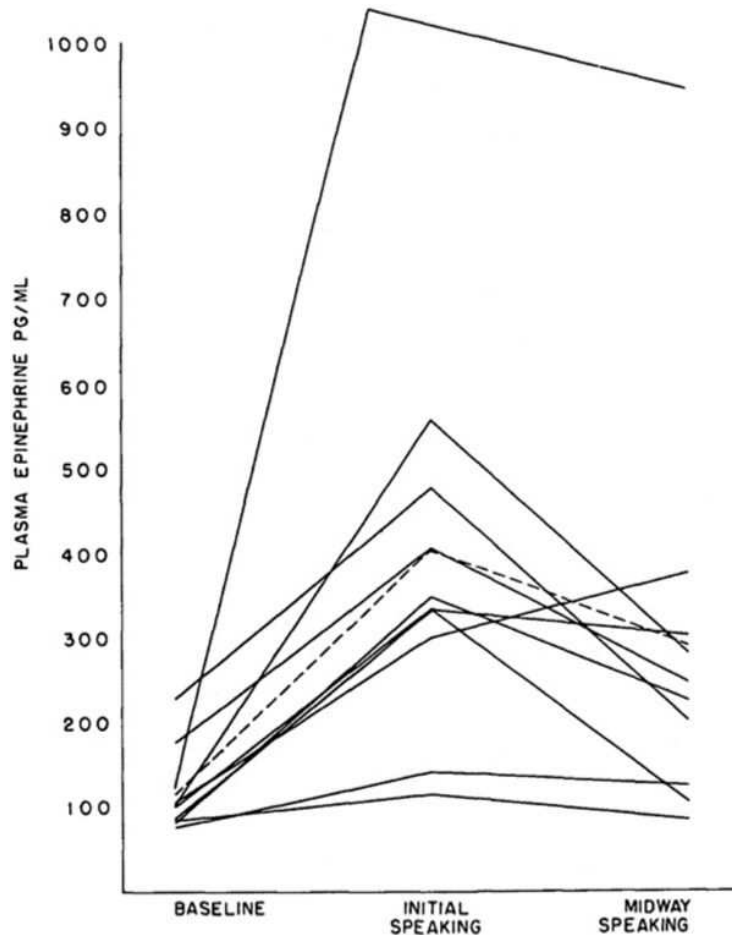


Figure 2. Effect of Public Speaking on Plasma Epinephrine

Plasma epinephrine response to different activities. Each **line** represents a single subject; the **dotted line** indicates the mean.

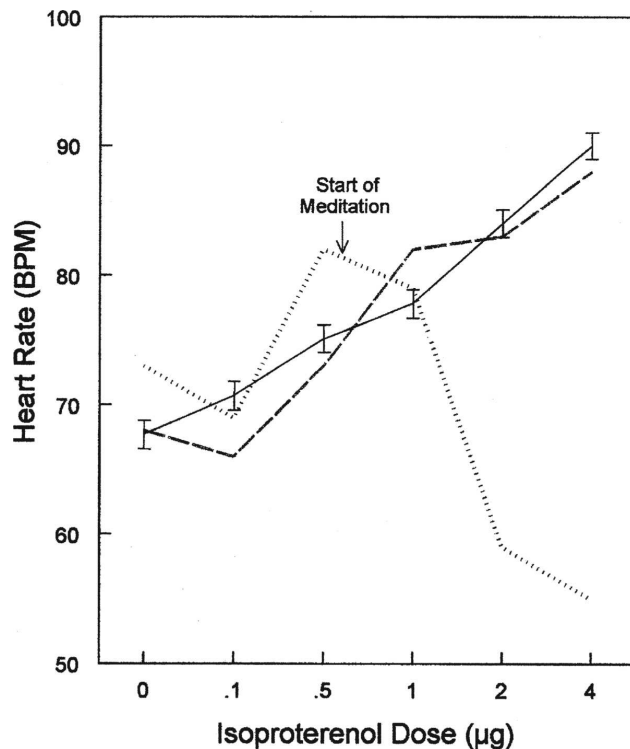


Figure 3. Effect of Meditation on HR Response to Infused Isoproterenol

Effects of meditation on chronotropic responses to isoproterenol. (Solid line) Mean \pm standard error response to isoproterenol in 93 women; (dotted line) patient's response while meditating; (dashed line) patient's response while instructed not to meditate. BPM = beats/min; HR = heart rate.

Allostasis is the process of achieving stability, **homeostasis**, through physiologic or behavioral change. This term may be new to you but provides for a more comprehensive understanding of the neuroendocrine and immune changes necessary for your body to maintain stability both in response to and in anticipation of “threat”. We maintain stability through variability! The short-term benefits to adaptive allostatic changes (fight or flight responses) often come at the long-term expense of the organism, an accumulative threat known as **allostatic load** (the proverbial straws on the camel’s back).

Through this definition, **stress** becomes the accumulative adaptive allostatic changes of the organism both psychological and physical at the time of the threat, real or perceived. This more comprehensive definition allows us, requires us, to understand the history of that individual as reflected by his or her adaptive capacity at the time of the stress if we want to understand the spiritual, mental, and physical response that is “stress”. When we look at this definition we may not find it too far-fetched (maybe even spot-on) to describe stress as that which defines us.

Next in the series we will discuss stress reduction versus stress distraction.

Your Journey to Health and Healing,
Gary E Foresman MD

The Stress Management Series

Part II

What is Stress Reduction?

Gary E. Foresman, MD

April 2011

In Part I of the series I gave a very physiologic perspective to the definition of stress. Of course, everyone's own subjective definition of stress may be more important than my description. Because each individual's experience of stress may manifest in a myriad of ways, your personal definition of stress makes an abstract concept extremely clear. To get a further overview of stress and its symptoms please go to www.stress.org.

Many will continue to point out that we can't live without stress, and with this I agree. Without challenges in our day most of us would sense a lack of fulfillment in our lives. The key aspect to facing these exciting challenges is the recognition of what is going on internally as we confront them. If you welcome a sense of calm, peaceful reflection in the face of turmoil then, indeed, you have activated your spiritual self in the midst of physical or psychological stress. This represents healthy stress. If you notice any other experience, then stress is wreaking havoc upon you. That is how we distinguish "healthy" vs. "unhealthy" stress. If you are not in a calm, reflective, clear state throughout your day, no matter how much turmoil, then a stress reduction practice is called for.

Since no one seems to agree on what stress is, it's not surprising to realize that no one really agrees on what stress reduction is either! So let's delineate a very broad range of **stress management practices** into a few distinct categories for clarity and teaching purposes:

Stress Unloading: This practice can be summed up in the saying "taking the time to stop and smell the roses". Everyone who senses stress in their life needs to take a survey of all the contributing factors and simplify their lives. Unload the dysfunctional relationships that you can, evaluate your career, and without blaming anyone or anything, eliminate those factors that don't work for you. Free up "self" time to practice the *healthy behaviors that heal stress*; please see my [Foundations of Health](#). If some factor needs to go, but you know it will take time, devise a doable, practical plan for changing that influence. Live the *Serenity Prayer*: "Grant me the **Serenity** to accept those things I can not change, the **Courage** to change the things I can, and the **Wisdom** to know the difference."

Stress Distraction: I included this category to distinguish it from an actual stress reduction practice. Stress distraction is any practice that "takes my mind off things for a while". Whether alcohol or drugs, computer or TV time, hobbies, or gambling, or shopping, most of us have some practice which "helps us unwind". Most of these practices initially provide a sense of calm after some stress. In actuality, none of these practices treat the stressor or help us develop a perspective

that changes our response to future stressors. Furthermore, our minds start to crave the feeling we get with that distractor and an addictive cycle can easily ensue. Having several healthy stress distractors like reading, listening to music, or watching a favorite TV show, etc. is normal and healthy. However, if your stress distractors keep you from evaluating and actually treating stress, it can potentially become an addiction or even your primary hurdle to directly dealing with any issue. Stress distraction must be distinguished from real stress reduction.

Stress-Relieving: A practice that helps dissipate the physiological effects of stress. Exercise, screaming, hitting a pillow with a whiffle bat—all of these make use of the fight or flight response and can “feel good”, relieving the tension. Other healthy practices such as massage and acupuncture can further open the channels of energy that can become blocked “under stress”. We all need healthy stress-relieving practices when we feel burdened by our stress responses. Yet none of these practices, as healthy as they are, evolve our responses to the stresses of the future.

Stress Reduction: Stress reduction is truly a *self-realization practice* and the focus of many of my upcoming articles. A self-realization practice is one which allows us to see ourselves, and ultimately everything, exactly as it is. This means taking time to know your spiritual self as well as you know your mental and physical aspects. This can be best spoken metaphorically. According to every wisdom tradition, the truth of a wave on the ocean is that it has unique wave-like properties, but a deeper truth to this wave is that it is, at its core, truly the ocean. As humans are to humanity, the truth of each unique individual, who we honor as an individual, possesses the truth that he or she is part of something much bigger. Although there are innumerable levels of importance to this truth, the practical point is if we view the world from a very small “wave-like” perspective it is a very dangerous, stressful place. Once we learn to view the world from our inherent “ocean-like” perspective, there are very few things that can stress us. To know thy self is what makes us human and the only path to authentic freedom in our lives.

I have now defined the most basic aspects to what most people call stress management into four simple categories. A healthy stress management program involves the conscious and balanced utilization of all four categories above. The next article will go deeper into how to develop and practice a true stress reduction program unique for every person.

Your Journey to Health and Healing,
Gary E Foresman MD

Stress Management Series - Part III
The Path to Freedom
Gary E Foresman MD
May 2011

We have now defined “stress” and “stress reduction” in a way that provides meaning for the remainder of our series. We will conclude with novel approaches to the development of a stress reduction program that honors both your individual viewpoint and your unique path of self-expression.

For any one of us to evolve our level of awareness so that we can grow and develop those habits which promote our own well-being, we proceed through a necessary “chain of knowingness”. True freedom comes through the conscious cultivation of habits which break through the walls in our prison of past conditioning. This chain of knowingness helps us understand why we do or don’t evolve within our own lives. This chain is as follows:

Belief precedes ***Understanding*** which leads to ***Knowingness***. (BUK)

Belief, defined simply, means to have an opinion or conviction. Before we learn anything, belief sways us toward whatever truth we look for. People often ask me, “Do you believe in meditation?” I can take you through the years of my responses; however, until I accepted that meditation was (along with everything else in the universe) indeed a belief system, I could never quite answer the question. What I mean by this is that if we don’t believe in something, we never try to understand it, and we certainly never incorporate this understanding into our knowingness. Is meditation actually a belief system? No. It just is. Yet we all believe much differently *in what we hold to be true about meditation*. Our belief allows us to only acknowledge the data which upholds that which we already believed to be true, *blinding* us to any other understanding. Many of my patients refuse to even try meditation, because they have, for whatever reason, been enculturated to not believe. Do you see how important belief is on the path to knowingness/unknowingness? Do you further see that it is those matters you (or your culture) hold the strongest convictions about in which you will be swayed so much more fervently whether towards believing or not believing, and therefore ultimately towards knowingness or “unknowingness”? When we discuss stress reduction and self-realization, it is these hurdles of disbelief that must be overcome for anyone to proceed towards understanding or knowingness.

Understanding is the mental process of comprehension and personal interpretation. In general, if one can remain open to the possibility to the truth of something (to believe), the next step a modern human being takes is an attempt to understand. In today’s information era with Google and Wikipedia, never has there been more data available to help someone proceed with a decision pathway. When we further understand our cultural belief in the saying “I think, therefore I am”, we have *deified* the process of intellectual understanding, often at the expense of *experiential knowingness*. For example, lately so

many people read about the potential side effects of anything, not just medicines, and decide that what they read must be true. The danger of believing everything you read as truth is that you could become too fearful to live. If you read about the possible side-effects of every little thing you do in your day to day life, you would do nothing: no showers, no eating, no anything. Our intellect can, of course, help us when we get “the right information”. In most situations, the only way to proceed is by living the information. Reading about tennis has almost no benefit to the person. On the other hand, learning tennis, taking lessons to help our game, and playing tennis regularly can provide countless benefits with, usually, very few risks. However, understanding is paramount, as for most of us it is the step toward true knowingness. Yet for many, knowledge is the prison of past conditioning which we use to impede any hope for growth in awareness.

Experiential Knowingness is that state of awareness when you have found a personal “truth”. It involves the spirit, the mind, and the body. When someone has found a stress-reduction program that works for him (or her), he knows it to be true on all levels. One has listened to his beliefs, his intelligence, and most importantly his experience to show what practice is right for him.

This process towards **knowing** something is a mindfully practiced behavior. Look at the process of riding a bike. If you don’t believe you can ride you may never get on! Just believing you can ride, however, does not make it so. Understanding how to ride a bike and receiving a helping hand can help us overcome the fear of not knowing. But you must get on and ride, and at some point you just **know** how to ride a bike.

This process (chain of knowingness) allows you to “transcend and include” each and every step in the totality of you. Once you truly know something, you have a more comprehensive grasp of its nature and your personal beliefs about it. With knowingness, compassion for all belief systems about any subject can be witnessed. All belief systems can be compassionately transcended and included into your integral awareness. Furthermore, knowingness allows you to respect the myriad understandings of the subject without the need to make others wrong or yourself right! Finally, knowingness comes from your daily practice, which is done not because you were taught this way, but because that practice is simply part of you.

In conclusion you might be wondering why this topic is under the stress management series. The answer lies in the simple truth that nothing I can teach you will reach the level of experience until you practice meditation. Once you do, once you’ve transcended any beliefs, once you’ve read what you need to read, you must practice. Only then, through experiential knowingness, will any of this make any sense!

Your Journey to Health and Healing,
Gary E Foresman MD

Stress Management Series Part 4

What is Meditation?

Gary E Foresman MD

05/2011

Meditation is not stress reduction. Nor is it prayer, or thought control, or “having no thoughts”, or any of a myriad of concepts you may have happened upon. The only way one can truly teach the practice of meditation is by discussing all things which it is not. As a meditation teacher for the past two decades, what I can advise about this subject would be to regard any information you hold to be true about it in an “as if” manner. Most followers of any specific path have been led to yet another belief system, which is the last thing humanity needs.

If meditation is best learned as a practice with no truths to be found, why would you read another article or attend another seminar about such a subject? Because there are enough belief systems already, because understanding is a usual part of the path to knowingness, and because the essence of what makes us human is our ability to meditate. Because you have been taught by religion to fear those practices which invoke spirituality without praising a certain god or belief system to tithe or donate to. Because you have been taught by science to fear things you cannot understand; it sounds too much like religion. More importantly, you have been taught to fear any teachings that transcend fear. Most importantly, nearly all of us possess a deep inner knowingness that there is more to life than fear and simply what our senses tell us, and it is that inner knowingness that seeks peace and unconditional joy.

That inner drive, that “guide” is you. Soul, Spirit, Self, You, whatever term we use should take you away from a belief *about* you and towards the actuality that *is* you. Meditation simply is that path you take towards self-discovery. Fear drives “normal” human activity. Peace and freedom from fear drives the meditative path. That part of us which seeks the change-less in an apparent world of constant change, which is you. We have all heard the aphorism “I think, therefore I am.” An entire belief system has grown up around it. Yet thinking is clearly just something we do. When I hear someone say “my thoughts are running away with me” (and who hasn’t experienced this?) it clearly delineates this “loss of the self”, the connection to the thinker of the thoughts. When we further understand the limitations of human thought (epistemology), then one understands that the knowingness of existence will have to come through an entirely different methodology.

Meditation is a journey of self-discovery through which the nature of existence is revealed, a re-experiencing of that primordial soup from whence you appeared into an apparently finite world, in an apparently finite body. The process of meditation is the “goal-less” goal. By coming to know the self, and then to know everything exactly as it

is, one transcends fear and *stress-reduction* comes as a natural side-benefit of a self-realization practice.

How one meditates is as personal of a decision to make as how one chooses to eat or to exercise. Is any one food plan or exercise pattern all-inclusive or “right” for everyone? No. Nor is there just one meditative practice which reproducibly takes one to silence/self. Learn a practice from a trusted, respected authority... then “just be it”.

When I tell you that the disciplined practice of meditation is the single most important practice we can do, individually, or collectively as a species, it is because it is the only way which we can transcend fear, cultivate compassion, cultivate joy. The experience of present-moment awareness, timeless awareness, transcends and includes normal time-bound awareness.

Our next article will teach you “how to meditate”, meaning one path on the pathless path. Confusing? Good.

Your Journey to Health and Healing,
Gary E Foresman MD

Stress Management Series Part 5

Breath-Awareness Meditation

Gary E Foresman MD

05/2011

This article is intentionally kept brief, clean and without metaphors or discussions on why we meditate. I am just giving you guidance on one validated method of practice.

Place: One can meditate anywhere. Having a designated room, or space in your home, for the practice of meditation assists tremendously, however it is not necessary. Meditating outside, although wonderful, adds many layers of distractions that can make it difficult for novice and experienced meditators alike. Pets love meditators; this is not pet cuddling time!

Time: I encourage practicing 30 minutes twice daily, at any time of day. Sunrise and sunset are beautiful meditation times. Meditation is also preferable before eating, as we are not trying to encourage sleep-time! Have a timepiece nearby for you to feel comfortable with the passage of time during meditation. I discourage alarms as they can pull one out of meditation too abruptly. We don't have the time to not meditate, so allow as much time as you can into your schedule even if it is only 15 minutes per day.

Easy In/Easy out: As time permits try to allow for some gentle yoga or stretching going into meditation. It allows the body and mind to settle. When finished take the time to gently allow your body and mind to acclimate to normal activity instead of rushing out of meditation.

The Practice:

- Sit comfortably with an upright posture, aligning the spine and energy centers
- Feet should be comfortably placed on the ground, or one can sit in the lotus or half-lotus position based on your preference
- Gently close your eyes
- Bring your attention to the breath, specifically to the in and out of the breath
- Just allow your attention to flow with the in and out of the breath
- When it is comfortable for you, introduce the “breath-awareness mantra” which is the simple, *internal* repetition of the sound “So” on the in breath and “Hum” on the out breath
- Continue to follow the in and out of the breath, silently repeating “So-Hum” on the in breath and out breath respectively
- The nature of meditative practice is such that your attention will be drawn to thoughts in your mind, feelings in your body, or sounds in the environment
- Whatever your attention has been drawn to, upon realization, gently bring your attention back to the in and out of the breath while silently repeating “So-Hum”
- Release any expectations you have for this process as you would any other thought
- Comfortably accept that the flow of the attention from breath to distraction is the meditative process
- When you feel that it is time to close your practice, glance at the timepiece nearby. If there is still time left, gently close the eyes and continue, or, if you have completed the allotted time, allow yourself a few moments to sit with your eyes

closed and let the attention go back to the normal feelings and sensations (easy out), and when you are ready open the eyes again.

- Finish by slowly getting up and going about your daily practices

The Art of Meditation: This is the time you allow for your attention to go to silence/self. The experience is that of *timelessness*, you will notice that some meditations “fly” by and some seem interminable. We never base the time spent on meditation according to your perceptions of that meditation—meaning that if time flies we don’t go longer, and that if time creeps by, we don’t cut the meditation off more quickly. This takes us to *nonjudgmental*, meaning our meditation time is not the time to judge thoughts as good or bad: whatever thoughts or feelings come up, we simply bring our attention back to the breath. If you have a truly brilliant thought, it will be there after meditation! This is not the time we allocate to daydreaming, but the true neutral observation of all that occurs. Finally, *effortless*, as any effort put into meditation works against the process. When I hear people tell me that I “tried” to meditate but “just couldn’t”, I tell them that within their very verbiage I am told why they found it so difficult. Trying prevents meditation! Just hold a gentle agreement to bring the attention to the breath whenever we realize our attention is on any distraction. This is what makes the meditative process so unique; we know that meditation is occurring when the “three symptoms of meditation: timelessness, nonjudgmentality and effortlessness” flow through the process.

The Experiences of Meditation: Three experiences can occur during a meditation:

1. Lots of thoughts, feelings: Yes, this is part of meditation and often the reason people say they “just can’t meditate”. Saying I can’t meditate because “my mind won’t stop” or “I can’t sit still” is the equivalent of saying I can’t brush my teeth because I have crud coating all of my teeth! If one holds no judgment of the awareness “that I’m having too many random thoughts” and just continues to meditate, all the benefits of meditation will eventually occur. Actually, the realization that random thoughts are intruding into your life is a great one to come to.
2. Sleep: Everyone will occasionally fall asleep during meditation; it means you are tired. If, however, it is a common occurrence, it simply brings awareness to the fact that a lifestyle change is necessary, because if one can’t sit still and close their eyes without falling asleep then a serious health disturbance is present. Sleep is a state of awareness known as *restful dullness* and is dramatically different physiologically from:
3. Restful Alertness: Silence...the experience of no thoughts or an awareness of the breath. Once we are aware of the silence, we are thinking, and it is time to bring the attention back to the breath, nothing more or less.

Although there are myriads of forms and types of meditation, “Breath-Awareness Meditation” has been practiced by millions of individuals over thousands of years. Enjoy, yet be aware that meditative practice, as any discipline, requires courage, conviction, and commitment!

Your Journey to Health and Healing,
Gary E Foresman MD

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