

Stress Busters for Interpreters (And Everyone Else)

By Julie Burns

I still remember one of those early days in my interpreting career. After trying to interpret over the din of a screaming child and his three unruly siblings at a routine follow-up appointment, my nerves were getting a bit frayed. Barely catching my breath, I scurried across campus to the saddest part of the hospital: the children's oncology ward.

Teresa was a frail teenager I had worked with before, languishing from the effects of leukemia in spite of the massive doses of chemotherapy and radiation that were ravaging her body. I stepped into her room and was immediately engulfed by the sorrow of her entire extended family crowded around her bedside. My assignment: to interpret the last rites for the Catholic chaplain.

As I stumbled over the phrases, worrying that my lack of familiarity with the terminology of the Catholic church was compounding the family's anguish, I struggled with my own sense of sadness and futility. Barely

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recovering from that heart-wrenching experience, I spent the rest of my day in a blur. My last appointment, with a woman in the delivery room laboring to give birth to a stillborn baby, pushed me over the edge. I ended my day by locking myself in the bathroom, sobbing uncontrollably, and wondering why I had chosen this profession.

Health care interpreters face multiple sources of stress that can affect their job performance and long-term health and well-being. Neurological research suggests that first-person interpreting may cause vicarious trauma, resulting in symptoms and reactions similar to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Other common

sources of stress in our field include hurried providers, upset patients, exhausting schedules, difficult terminology, heartbreaking stories, and challenging ethical dilemmas. Stress can affect our concentration, memory, and ability to handle the mentally strenuous complexity of language conversion. Irritability, sleeplessness, headaches, anxiety, increased blood pressure, decreased immunity, and heart disease are all linked to stress.

So how can we deal with the inevitable stress that accompanies our work? Fifteen years after that harrowing day at the hospital, I am deeply gratified by my career choice. My only regret is that it took me so long to discover the

Box 1

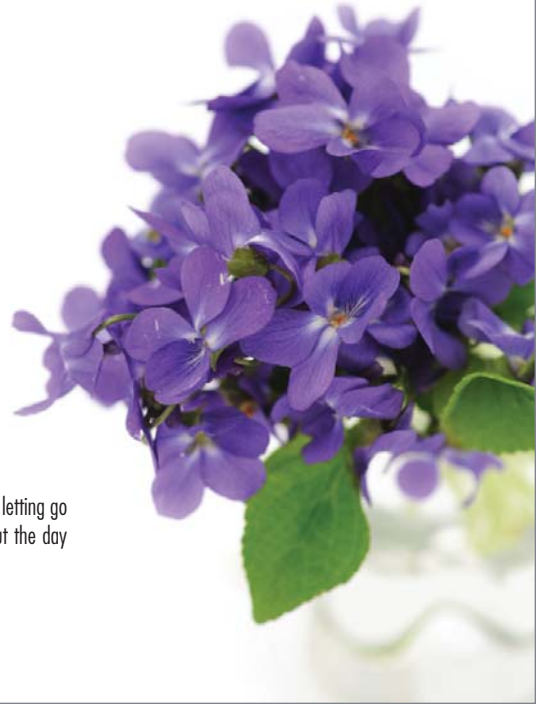
Jin Shin Jyutsu Daily Wellness Exercise

The following routine can be done in five minutes each morning, or anytime you feel stress building up. Gently hold each position for several good breaths.

1. Hold upper arms by folding them across chest.
2. Sit on both hands.
3. Sit on left hand with right hand on left shoulder.
4. Sit on right hand with left hand on right shoulder.
5. Lightly place both hands on opposite inner thighs.
6. Place both hands simultaneously at top of calves.
7. Place fingers on left and right base of skull.
8. Fold hands (as in prayer) and relax.
9. Gently cup each thumb and finger.

This simple technique is extremely helpful in preparing me for the day and for letting go of tension at the end of the day. I use the finger holds as needed throughout the day depending on what emotions I may be feeling.

Courtesy of Deborah Myers. Follow Deborah through the Daily Wellness Exercise at www.healthatyourfingertips.com/services.htm#.



tools that enable me to continue doing this work without feeling emotionally exhausted by the day's events. I would like to share with you three powerful strategies that will help reduce stress and decrease your risk of burnout and long-term health consequences.

Step 1: Understanding Stress

You may already know that the “butterflies” in your stomach or the muscle tension in your neck is part of your body's normal response to stress. Many of the effects of stress are not as apparent. Understanding what is happening on a neurological level can give you insight into new approaches in dealing with stress.

Acute Stress

Acute stress has an instant effect on your mental, physical, and emotional state. Stress prepares the body for defensive action by releasing hormones that sharpen the senses, speed up the pulse, deepen respiration, and

tense the muscles. During this classic “fight-or-flight” response, stress is reflected in your cardiac rhythm. If we were to look at an EKG of a person faced with acute stress, we would typically see jagged lines reflecting an erratic, disordered, incoherent pattern in the heart's rhythm. In contrast, positive emotions are associated with a smooth, ordered, coherent EKG pattern in the heart's rhythmic activity. Other body systems reflect this agitation as well. Unfortunately, because of our fast-paced lifestyle, many of our cardiac rhythms look erratic much of the time.

When we are operating under acute

stress it becomes more difficult to think clearly. We make more mistakes, we have difficulty processing new information, and emotions cloud our judgment. During an interpreting session, we may have to ask for more frequent repetitions, have trouble maintaining accuracy and completeness, find it difficult to manage the flow of conversation, lose our objectivity, and become emotionally affected by the emotions of those around us. Although training in the standards, ethics, and practice of interpreting gives us the foundation for dealing with on-the-job challenges, we may have a harder time accessing this

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knowledge and being able to put it into practice under the duress of a stressful interpreting session.

Chronic Stress

While acute stress can temporarily impact our job performance and our ability to make reasoned choices, it is chronic stress—i.e., continued stress over long periods of time—that is the most detrimental to our long-term health and well-being. The symptoms of acute stress are usually short-lived and cause no long-term damage. Acute stress unrelieved, however, turns into chronic stress, which is damaging.

Numerous health problems are associated with chronic stress. The American Institute of Stress reports that an estimated 75-90% of visits to primary care physicians are for stress-related issues.¹ In the INTERHEART study conducted by the American Psychosomatic Society, stress was found to triple the risk of heart disease.² This was true across all countries and cultures that were studied. Other health problems that have been associated with stress include strokes, frequent bouts of cold and flu, stomach problems, sleep disorders, reduced brain function, and sexual dysfunction.

Given that interpreting is a stressful profession, how can you manage your acute stress effectively so that it does not become a chronic condition?

Step 2: Focus on Yourself

If the first step in managing stress is to understand it, the second step is to give yourself permission to focus on yourself to deal with it. It may seem obvious, but you cannot take care of others if you do not take care of yourself. Like many in the caring professions, it is often difficult for us as health care interpreters to take the time to do the simple things that will relieve our stress and help us be effec-

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tive in our work and in our lives. Here are a few ways to help ourselves.

Get enough sleep. How many of us get the required seven to eight hours of sleep every night? Oftentimes when we are stressed, we have a hard time falling or staying asleep, when sleep is actually what we most need. Sleep time is when our bodies literally recharge, renew, and repair.

Nourish your body. Choose nutrient-dense foods in their natural state over

the caffeine and sugar/carb fix, which in the long run only exhausts our adrenals and increases our susceptibility to insulin resistance and diabetes.

Nurture your soul. This means something different to each of us, but generally it involves spending some time every day doing what truly nourishes us at the deepest level.

Prepare your body for the day's events by practicing relaxation techniques such as yoga or Jin Shin

Box 2

HeartMath's Quick Coherence Technique



The following is a very simple technique that you can use any time to help reduce stress and think more clearly.

- 1. Shift your focus to your heart area:** Get comfortable and take a couple of deep breaths. Simply focus your attention on the heart or the center of your chest. You can close your eyes if you wish.
- 2. Breathe from your heart area:** Imagine your breath flowing in and out of your heart area. Focus on your breath entering and leaving your body through the heart area.
- 3. Recall a memory of a time that you felt good:** Finally, recall a time when you felt really good. Try to re-experience that moment. Keep breathing gently through your heart, simply enjoying the pleasant memory.

This simple technique, practiced regularly, will have a positive cascade of effects on your stress level as well as on your long-term health and well-being.

Additional Resources

American Holistic Medical Association
www.holisticmedicine.org

American Institute of Stress
www.stress.org

American Psychological Association
Managing Traumatic Stress: Tips for Recovering from Disasters and Other Traumatic Events
<http://apahelpcenter.org/articles/article.php?id=22>

Information on Nourishing Foods
www.westonaprice.org and
www.eatwellguide.org/i.php?pd=Home

Institute of HeartMath
www.heartmath.org

Jin Shin Jyutsu
www.healthatyourfingertips.com

National Center for Post-traumatic Stress
Work-related Secondary Traumatic Stress
www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/newsletters/research-quarterly/V8N2.pdf

National Institutes of Health
<http://health.nih.gov/topic/Stress>

National Mental Health Information Center
<http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/cmhs/EmergencyServices>

Publications on Mental Health & Disaster Issues for Responders
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
<http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/disasterrelief/first.aspx>

The Communication Bridge
www.thecommunicationbridge.net

Jyutsu. Jin Shin Jyutsu is an ancient Japanese healing art that releases the body's deep tension and imbalance by restoring normal energy flow. It is a simple style of acupressure. Jin Shin Jyutsu recognizes that the body contains energy pathways that nourish our cells and internal organs. When one or more paths become restricted due to tension or trauma, these energy flows can lock up like a circuit breaker to prevent overload. This blockage can eventually disrupt the complete path of energy flow, leading to discomfort, pain, or disease. By placing your own fingertips at designated points and holding them briefly in combination, you can restore normal energy flow, find relief from stress and tension, and prevent it from causing deeper problems. Box 1 on page 25 demonstrates a routine I have found particularly helpful.

Make sure to check the resources section in the box on this page for more tips on achieving healthy living.

Step 3: Access Your Heart's Intelligence

Usually we think of intelligence as being centered in the brain, but did you know that the heart has its own intelligence? Fifteen years of scientific research by Doc Childre, founder of the Institute of HeartMath in Northern California, indicates that, in addition to being a pump, the heart is actually a four-way communication system, sending messages to the rest of the body through pressure waves, neural pathways, hormonal secretions, and electromagnetism.³

When we generate heartfelt emotional states such as feelings of appreciation and love, we can retrain the heart's regenerative and restorative processes and build neural and emotional bridges from states of stress, pain, and discomfort to states of appreciation and pleasure. This shifts our sensual percep-

tion from one of threat to safety, rebalances our autonomic nervous system, and creates coherence in our heart rhythms. When we enter heart coherence, the heart sends signals to the brain, giving us a chance to facilitate higher reasoning and to make better decisions. More coherence tends to indicate less stress, which can lead to an improved immune system, relaxation, hormonal balance, brain function, learning, creativity, and emotional resilience. Heart coherence allows us to respond effectively, rather than from our jangled nerves and overwrought emotions. Box 2 on page 26 demonstrates a quick technique to help restore cognitive balance.

Protecting Ourselves While Helping Others

Thinking back to that day I broke down in sobs in the hospital bathroom at the end of an emotionally draining interpreting shift, I am grateful that I have found tools along the way to help me deal with those difficult times. As health care interpreters, we give a voice to the voiceless. We are

the bridge that enables clear and accurate communication between patients and providers, thereby leading to better health outcomes. It is vitally important that we take care of ourselves so that we can continue to bridge the language gap.

Notes

1. American Institute of Stress, www.stress.org/stress.htm.
2. Sheps, David S., Nancy Frasure-Smith, Kenneth E. Freedland, and Robert M. Carney. "The INTERHEART Study: Intersection Between Behavioral and General Medicine." *Psychosomatic Medicine* (American Psychosomatic Society, 2004), Volume 66:797-798.
3. Childre, Doc, and Bruce Wilson. *The Heartmath Approach to Managing Hypertension: The Proven, Natural Way to Lower Your Blood Pressure* (New Harbinger Publications, 2007).

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