

## **Stress and ego functions**

**author: Lidy Evertsen**

### **Introduction on ego functions**

In order to live a satisfactory adult life we, human beings, need a certain set of skills to handle ourselves in our environment. Compared to other species human beings are born pretty helpless. This gives us an important advantage: our brains and our nerve system are growing and developing in a way that meets the specific requests of the environment that we are born in, so that we are able to handle it in an optimal way.

*Young hunters on the African savannah develop better orientation than western children, living in a city. Western children on the other hand might develop better technical skills in order to deal with their TV's and computers.*

If circumstances are very hard, or even traumatic at certain times, we develop specific skills that form our defence system, or stated differently our character structure.

*Children that are beaten up severely every time they do something perceived as wrong by their parents, might develop the ability to numb themselves or even leave their bodies mentally.*

*A child whose mother falls ill for some time might develop a keen eye for the needs of other people.*

But, because we use them automatically, these specific skills can be a problem later in life when the circumstances have changed.

*When a child that has been beaten up meets warm, friendly people later in life It, is hard to build a loving relationship if she automatically leaves her body whenever she is touched. If the child whose mother has been ill automatically starts to care for every person who needs something, he might end up with a burn-out in his working life.*

In Bodydynamic therapy we are also aiming at the development of skills that fit a non-traumatic life in order to create a choice about which strategy fits the circumstances of the moment.

We have made an inventory of resources and skills that we need in our adult lives. We call them ego functions.

### **Introduction on stress**

Stress is a physical and hormonal reaction, produced by our body in order to cope with difficulties and threats to our well-being. Stress is good and necessary when it suits the difficulty or the menace. However our stress reactions are determined by evolution; they still work in the same way as in times when we had to cope with predators like lions and with the menaces of starvation and thirst.

Our brains and nervous system are not only reacting on real threat, but also on expected threats, or on menaces in our imagination. (Robert Sapolsky: Taming stress – Scientific American sept. 2003) That's why we, leading our cultivated lives, often fall a prey to unproductive stress that menaces our well-being and health.

© Lidy Evertsen. Tel. +31-20 6712099 Email: [amever@tiscali.nl](mailto:amever@tiscali.nl)

*You are not allowed to distribute this article or parts of this article unless you have a written consent of the author.*

### **Mutual connection and Dignity**

According to the Bodydynamic way of thinking two fundamental drives form the base of a fulfilling life: mutual connection and dignity. People are social animals who cannot survive very well without contact with other human beings. Like many other organisms man has a tendency to rise, not only physically, but also psychologically.

While growing up we adapt to our environment so that, depending on our circumstances and disposition, we reach an optimal point in balancing these two fundamental needs, mutual connection and dignity.

*If, as a child, we are rebuked because we express our emotions, we feel like losing connection with our parent. Our solution can be that we clench our teeth and reduce our breathing out, in order not to express ourselves anymore and behave like a “good” child. We protect enough connection with our parent and we feed our dignity with the fact that we are “good”. On the other hand our dignity is suffering, because we are not able to use our strength and our emotions freely anymore to reach our goals.*

Once we are adults our circumstances often change, which means that another optimal point would be possible, with higher levels of mutual connection and dignity.

*If we could learn to express our emotions in contact with people who can handle them better than our parents were able to, this could be a contribution to a higher level of mutual connection. If we don't need to be “good” anymore we can say “no” to what we don't like.*

And precisely these factors, mutual connection, expressing our emotions, using our strength, help us to come back to a quiet point of balance after the uproar of a stress reaction. It's a place in ourselves where we can experience well-being, where our physical and hormonal systems are able to recover.

### **Equilibrium**

People who were traumatized and did not fully recover are constantly existing on a too high level of agitation. They lack equilibrium of sympathetic and parasympathetic activity in the nerve system. Shock trauma therapy works towards regaining this equilibrium. To reach this goal, development of certain ego functions is essential.

## **Ego functions**

The Bodydynamic System recognizes the next eleven ego functions, with their several sub functions, who are related to specific relevant muscles (or fascia), their actions and their psychological content:

- I. **CONNECTEDNESS**, consisting of three sub functions:
  - a. **bonding**: the dialogue between child and parents, starting already intra-uterine. It is a process of exchanging signals, looking at each other, touching and reacting, by means of which child and parents connect and develop intimacy.
  - b. **heart contact/opening**: it's the soft , warm flow in your heart area, that you may experience in contact with yourself as well as in contact with others. It's also

© Lidy Evertsen. Tel. +31-20 6712099 Email: [amever@tiscali.nl](mailto:amever@tiscali.nl)

*You are not allowed to distribute this article or parts of this article unless you have a written consent of the author.*

about the ability to acknowledge and receive this warm flow that someone else might experience being in contact with you.

**c. feeling support and self-support:** we are social animals who need mutual support. While growing up we gradually develop more and more possibilities to internalize this external support, so that we learn how to support ourselves. This gives us feelings of strength and stability. Experiencing support and self-support is a sound base for giving support to others. Social systems, whether they are groups of friends, families, tribes or nations, are, amongst others, based on this network of individuals giving and receiving support.

## II. POSITIONING, consisting of five sub functions:

**a. stance towards life:** this concerns how you position yourself in life as “I”; how much you value yourself in life; how much dignity you are able to experience from your way of being in life.

**b. staying power:** the ability to stick with your own choices, to use your energy and power for what is important to you. It is also the ability to keep moving forward.

**c. standing on one’s own:** the ability to be yourself and to do things yourself. (This last point might also mean the ability to call in adequate help)

**d. stance toward values and norms:** do you have opinions about good and bad, about the explicit and implicit rules around being and doing; how clear are they and how flexible can you be with them?

**e. orienting(keeping or loosing one’s head):** can you gather relevant information in situations you meet? Are you directing your attention sufficiently or do you loose your head?

## III. CENTRING, consisting of four sub functions:

**a. awareness of own centre:** your fundamental centre is located in your belly. It has to do with the same muscles and ligament as bonding.

**b. filling out from the inside:** to fill and fulfil yourself with your own energy and self-experience.

**c. being oneself in one’s different roles:** bringing your personality, your energy and your impulses to the role you are playing, taking into account the nature of that role.

**d. feelings of self worth:** this concerns the sacrum, that plays a part in your ability to move fully into the world and it concerns the front of your chest. The centre of individuality is located in your chest area.

## IV. BOUNDARIES, consisting of five sub functions:

**a. physical boundary:** the skin is a person’s concrete physical boundary. It forms the contact area between physical “I” and physical “non-I”. The umbilical fascia is the border where mother-system changes to child-system, separated by the transitional area of the umbilical chord.

**b. boundaries of personal space (energetic boundaries):** we can also experience a border between energetic “I” and energetic “non-I”. This sub function concerns the ability to keep yourself energetically within these boundaries and to keep others out of them, or to let people come into your personal space.

**c. boundaries of territorial space:** this is about the area outside of your energetic field that still feels as yours; your room, your possessions, etc. It's about the ability to keep others out of it, or give them permission to enter or use it.

**d. boundaries of social space:** be able to keep others out of your group/dyad, or to let them in. Space for your own opinions. You feel that you are a part of certain groups and not of some others, you are identifying with specific groups. Marking out of these groups consist of implicit and explicit rules.

**e. self-assertion (making space for oneself in social contact):** making space for your own expression, needs, impulses and interest.

**V. GROUNDING AND REALITY TESTING**, consisting of three sub functions:

**a. ability to stand one's ground, feel rooted and supported by it:** Literally this means the ability to sense the ground, make contact with it and let yourself be supported by it. Figuratively it means to feel rooted in your existence and to know that you are supported by it, which is the base for trust.

**b. relationship between reality and fantasy/image:** the ability to check your fantasy and interpretations with factual perceptions.

**c. experience and grounding of extrasensory perceptions:** shock and peak experiences, meditative and dissociate conditions may cause us to perceive things that are beyond concrete daily reality, and make us loose connection with our body and with our concrete feelings. These are conditions of very heightened energy levels, or special frequencies of energy, that need to be integrated in our daily existence, in order to keep our existence whole and complete. This means that we need to connect these energy levels with our body and our concrete sensing and feeling, in order to integrate them properly.

**VI. SOCIAL BALANCES**, consisting of five sub functions:

**a. balancing our own needs/feelings/desires against others' expectations:** in order to not loose ourselves in the expectations that others have and in order to prevent us from isolating ourselves.

**b. degree of pulling oneself together/letting go:** it has to do with inner balance and is associated with the lateral part of the upper legs.

**c. degree of "façade" or "front" in interactions:** to what degree are you showing your feelings behind your social façade, formed by your facial and shoulder muscles.

**d. balancing sense of personal identity against being a group member:** this is, like a. and c., balancing yourself and the outer world.

**e. balance of managing stress and resolving it:** if the level of stress suits the situation it is important that you are able to handle it and that you can use it to solve the situation. If the stress or the stress level are not fitting the situation, or you are unable to handle it, it is important to be able to let it go or to flee from it.

**VII. COGNITIVE SKILLS**, consisting of six sub functions:

**a. orienting:** gather information needed to move (as safely as possible) in your environment and to be able to find your direction.

**b. cognitive grasp:** development of knowledge based on physical experience.

**c. understanding:** comprehending something well enough to stand forth with it.

Having developed enough knowledge to be able to see through a situation or a process.

**d. grasp of reality:** the ability to apply cognitive understanding to different situations.

**e. planning:** the ability to plot a process in a time frame.

**f. contemplation/consideration:** thinking about situations, reality, processes; looking at different aspects, balancing them, in order to, based on this process, eventually make a choice, form or change opinions, reorientate, reconsider your understanding of something, get a better understanding of reality or to be able to plan further ahead.

**VIII. ENERGY MANAGEMENT**, consisting of five sub functions:

**a. containment of emotions:** the ability to (physically) contain emotional charge of different levels. Therefore you need your body to be vivid enough to not leak the energy or to let it “explode”; we strive for muscles and connective tissue strong enough to hold the charge and flexible enough to permit suitable expression of emotions there, where we wish to.

**b. containment of high level energy:** high level energy arises from strong emotions and shock and peak experiences.

**c. self-containment:** this is covering the same subject as VI b, the degree of pulling oneself together or letting go.

**d. self-containment-feeling “backed”:** the ability to support yourself and to know yourself supported by others.

**e. containment of sensuality:** this is also a sub function of XI Gender skills.

**IX. SELF-ASSERTION**, consisting of three sub functions:

**a. self-assertion:** being able to make your personal and physical identity visible in the world.

**b. asserting oneself in one’s roles:** being able to fulfill your role (e.g. “wife”, “teacher”, “host”, etc.) by being true to yourself, in contact with your feelings, conscious of your own value.

**c. forward momentum (= forward power) and sense of direction:** the first time you experience this is while being born, when you experience the pressure to leave your mother’s body through the birth channel. The pressure moves up from the heel through the sacrum, to the crown of your head. This makes you push off and move vigorously forward out into the world. The stretch reflex is working here.

Awareness of sacrum, foot soles and crown of the head might still bring us into contact with how it is to use our own power to handle stress and pressure, and how to use it to move forward.

**X. PATTERNS OF INTERPERSONAL SKILLS**, consisting of seven sub functions:

**a. reaching out**

**b. gripping and holding on**

**c. drawing towards oneself and holding close**

**d. receiving and giving from one’s core**

**e. pushing away and holding at a distance**

**f. releasing, letting go****g. taking on tasks (assignments)**

All these skills have to do with seeing other people; be able to have contact and be close and to be able to let go of the contact, in order to be on one's own; let go of contact that is not good for you, drawing closer contact that is good for you.

Shortly, taking care of the need for contact and taking care of the need for rest and privacy.

**XI. GENDER SKILLS**, consisting of five sub functions:

**a. awareness of gender:** men and women have different characteristics, like gender organs, voice, hair, heart rhythm, muscle mass, etc.

**b. experience of gender:** the experience of being male or female on a deep and private level.

**c. experience of gender role:** what does it mean to be male or female in a specific environment?

**d. containment of sensuality and sexuality:** similar to VIII e, how to deal with the charge of sensual and sexual feelings.

**e. manifestation of sensuality and sexuality:** will you allow yourself to be visible as male or female? Do you behave suitably in a certain situation, environment and social context?

**Some general theory and reflexions on stress**

To start with it is useful to discern stressors from stress response. Stressors are factors that are menacing our well-being. To cope with these menaces we react with a stress response.

*Imagine yourself on a winter day. You promise yourself time to read a book. You put the heater on 20 C ° and position yourself well in an easy chair. After some time you realize that the heater isn't working properly and you are cold (stressor). If you don't succeed in making the heater work again, then you'll get goose-flesh and your teeth will start to chatter, a reaction in your body that tries to regulate your temperature (stress response)*

Sapolsky (*Why Zebra's don't get ulcers 1994 and 1998*) talks about three kinds of stressors:

- a. acute physical stressors, for example being wounded by a predator.
- b. chronic physical stressors, such as locusts eating a crop of a poor African farmer, causing famine.
- c. psychological and social stressors, as in the menace of a missed promotion.

The most important hallmarks of a stress response:

1. rapid mobilization of energy from fat cells, liver and muscles and the inhibition of new energy storage
2. if this energy is mobilized, heart rate, blood pressure and breathing rate increase in order to deliver fuel to all relevant muscles
3. your system will economize on digestion, growth and reproduction; this means it inhibits digestion and growth, it decreases ovulation, likelihood of carrying pregnancies to term, erection and sexual desire

© Lidy Evertsen. Tel. +31-20 6712099 Email: [amever@tiscali.nl](mailto:amever@tiscali.nl)

*You are not allowed to distribute this article or parts of this article unless you have a written consent of the author.*

4. the immune system stops working properly
5. pain perception might be blunted
6. some parts of memory and senses are sharpened.

In the beginning of the last century Walter Cannon formulated the term “fight or flight” syndrome with respect to these responses.

Our stress system works best with acute physical stressors. It copes pretty well with chronic physical stressors. The third category, psychological and social stressors, which most affects modern western people, causes the most trouble. Our stress system has evolved in order to cope with physical threats. This third category of stressors is mainly in our head and the augmentation of energy level that takes place in a stress response, doesn't have a chance of being discharged physically.

*For three years you are working in a medical team. You have always had a good reputation. The head of the team has announced that she will retire a year from now. You expect to have a good chance of getting a promotion and become the new head of the team. Suddenly a rumour spreads that the management of the institute are talking with a practitioner from outside of the institute, who gained a great deal of publicity in connection with a book he has published. This feels menacing and you show signs of a stress response; your heart rhythm accelerates, your blood pressure rises, your breathing becomes faster, your muscles tense up, etc. But you cannot put your teeth in your rival or put your hands around his throat to strangle him, you can't even take a deep breath and roar to impress and scare him.*

To put it differently, your physical reactions don't lead to a solution. On the contrary, in the long run the stress response itself can make you ill. It would be better if you can interpret the stress response as a signal that makes you wonder whether you can do something (would it be useful to go and talk with the management?) and to calm your physical signs of high alert.

What forms a psychological or social stressor is different for every individual. Generally spoken the stress response is a mechanism to bring an organism that gets out of balance back to a new equilibrium. Originally they found the term homeostasis for this equilibrium, because they thought that there was a fixed optimal point for certain measures in the body, like level of oxygen in the blood, acidity and temperature. Nowadays we prefer the term allostasis to indicate that there are different optima for different circumstances (when you are asleep you have a lower ideal heart beat than when you are running)

Now we can describe a stressor as everything that brings the body out of allostatic balance. The stress response then is your body's strive for re-establishment of this allostatic balance.

*You are at home alone. It is in the middle of the night. You awake, you find it difficult to fall asleep again. You start to consider how easily one could force the lock of your door.....it's possible that somebody knows that you are alone, and that you have a considerable amount of cash in the house.....your blood pressure rises, your heart beat goes up, you breath more rapidly.....stress response.*

In this case your stress response doesn't take you to a new equilibrium, to reach that it would be better if you were able to evaluate the reality of your expectations, to regulate your breathing, decrease your muscle tension and to calm down, so that you can go back to sleep.

In the third quarter of the last century John Mason, Seymour Levine and Jay Weiss discovered the following factors that make psychological stress worse:

1. a lack of possibilities for expressing frustration

© Lidy Evertsen. Tel. +31-20 6712099 Email: amever@tiscali.nl

*You are not allowed to distribute this article or parts of this article unless you have a written consent of the author.*

2. no sense of control
3. no social support
4. no perspective that things will get better; lack of hope

So we need to take these factors into account if we want to regulate our own or our clients' stress. Beside other aspects, stress management must be aiming at development of control, expression of emotions, social network and development or preservation of hope.

Kerstin Uvnas Moberg has done extensive research on the influence of physical touch and the production of the hormone oxytocin that belongs to it. She has proven that regular touch, that is wanted and that feels safe, given during some time (20 minutes), stimulates the production of oxytocin in the person who is touched, but even to a higher degree in the person who is touching. This hormone stimulates rest and well-being. With this we have (literally) an important stress reductor at hand.

### **Some Biodynamic concepts relating to working with stress management**

#### Psychological muscle function:

When we develop as a child, we do so on several levels at the same time. While we are busy training to get our arm muscles under control, so that we can reach out to our parents, we also experience the connection between us and them, at the same time we feel how our need for security is fulfilled, we begin to know which sounds accompany this contact, etc. These levels form an undivided experience. This means that the experience of the muscles with which we reach out brings us in contact with the whole memory pathway that belongs to this experience. We call this psychological muscle function.

#### Hypotone-neutral-hypertone:

Looking at the example above, if we are met lovingly when reaching out, the muscles will be vivid and free in their movements. In that case we call them neutral; they have a fundamental tension that expresses a willingness to act, there will be enough energy to move whenever there is an impulse to it.

In case we are neglected or rejected from the beginning, while training this movement, we will give up on its impulse. The relating muscles have too little energy for us to be able to become aware of the impulse. We call the muscles hypotone in this case.

If we are well-received in the beginning, but our parents become overwhelmed by our need of attention at a certain time (think of illness, or birth of another child), then the lack or the insufficiency of response is so painful, that we start to control the impulse of the movement. The relating muscles allow the impulses, but the muscle tension is permanently heightened in order to inhibit expression of the impulse in a movement. The muscles are hypertone.

Hypotone muscles form a problem in management of stress, because they can't handle the higher levels of energy. They are an important working area when working on stress management.

Hypertone muscles give a problem if coming down from higher energy levels to rest.

Hypotone muscles need to be trained gradually to be more active and we need to become conscious of their psychological content. Hypertone muscles must learn to tense to different measures and they have to learn how to let the impulse be expressed in its final movement.

### Mutual connection and Dignity as fundamental drives

In the Bodydynamic System we see two drives as fundamental: the drive for mutual connection and the drive for dignity.

For Mutual connection we need a person who is in contact with herself and another person who also is in contact with himself. When these two people connect with each other, while preserving the contact with themselves, we can speak of Mutual connection. Much human contact consists of someone who gives up on contact with himself, in order to be able to have contact with the other, or of someone who gives up on the contact with the other, in order to be able to stay in contact with herself.

Dignity is the experience of your own value, stemming from developing your possibilities, your resources, and bringing them out into the world. We could say you can rise to your full height.

Often people refrain from developing all their resources (or they develop them only partially) because they think it is not allowed, the environment cannot handle it, or because they didn't learn how certain abilities could be developed.

Sometimes dignity is sacrificed in order to keep the connection, at other times connection is sacrificed in order to protect dignity.

In the end they are inseparable. If you give up on dignity you have to give up part of the contact with yourself and this will restrict the mutual connection. If you give up on mutual connection you are restricted in developing certain resources inside of you and that will diminish your dignity.

### Ego levels:

In the Bodydynamic system we perceive ego development as a layered complex. First our "I" starts to develop on a body level, our muscle reflexes become voluntary activities, we learn to know our physical needs, our body sensations tell us whether we feel good or not. We learn to know our environment by means of our senses, but we feel non-separated from that environment. We call this level the **body ego**, a level where we feel ourselves by means of our sensations. The development of body ego takes place mainly from conception till approximately four years of age.

Halfway in the development of body ego we start to separate as "I" from the other. We learn how we are different from others and how we are alike. Language starts to play a role. We call this level the **individual ego**. A development related to the right to be "me", a level where we identify with our feelings. This development takes place from around 2 ½ years till the start of puberty.

A short while after the onset of the development of the individual ego we become aware of our "I" as taking part in a group, later on taking part in different groups and of the role, or part we play in these groups. This is our "I" as acting social being. We call this the **role ego** or the **social ego**. This development starts at around three years and goes on into adulthood.

One should also mention the **observing ego** which is able to observe what happens to us more or less apart from our identification with sensations, feelings, emotions or social role. The observing ego perceives what the meaning is of what we see, hear, smell, taste and feel. We definitely need this level of the ego to bring about changes.

We can think of these ego levels as the layers of an onion, they are placed around each other, but together they form a whole, the onion, our personality.

If one of these layers is weaker than the others (caused by shock trauma or developmental trauma) we often compensate for this in another layer.

*When Anna was two years old she had an accident that brought her into hospital for several months. She couldn't move and she saw too little of her parents. Normal development (experimenting moving away from the parents and coming back again) couldn't take place. By three years old she had recovered from her physical injuries, but she hadn't really acquired her right to be an individual separated "I". Unconsciously she is always living with the danger of being left. She goes to school, she's a smart and nice girl. She does well at school. By playing an active role in the group she is popular, which gives her a certain reassurance for her abandonment anxiety. Good compensation we could say, but she is not free to let her role rest occasionally. That would trigger her abandonment anxiety too much, which would cause too much stress. But to play her part Anna needs a higher level of alertness. It would do Anna good to strengthen her individual ego. This would set her free to use her well developed social skills.*

In general we could say that the stronger and the more integrated our ego is, the more stress we can cope with and the less we will experience an event as a stressor.

### Bigger Me:

If our emotional charge is raising higher than we physically can handle, we start to react from a different part of our being. We don't react from our neo-cortex anymore, the part of our brains that organizes our conscious thinking, but we react from the parts of our brains that are faster than consciousness. We call it the bigger Me; it's domain is formed by survival reflexes, instincts, automatised learning and skills, genetic information, the ability to make new connections between two neural memory pathways, which generates new knowledge, as well as intuition.

According to circumstances and the available knowledge and skills the bigger Me will always provide the optimal solution. Afterwards it might happen that the ego disapproves of these solutions. The bigger Me's aim is survival, it is not involved with ethics. In the end the ego should learn to acknowledge the brilliancy of the solutions of the bigger Me in order to prevent causing chronic stress.

## **Resourcing: working with ego functions**

In the Bodydynamic System elaborate research has been done on motor development, psychological muscle content and how to use this in the therapeutic practice.

The data are organized in different theoretic models. These models each give a different arrangement of these data. Together they form a matrix. The Bodydynamic Character structure model organizes the muscles according to developmental stages, it shows them on a time scale. The already mentioned Bodydynamic Ego function model arranges the muscles according to psycho-social skills and acting abilities.

Working with ego functions actually means working with the psychological and motor aspects of certain muscles. It means that we have to learn to feel the muscles or the actions that they take part in; we have to become aware of their emotional content, we need to

© Lidy Evertsen. Tel. +31-20 6712099 Email: [amever@tiscali.nl](mailto:amever@tiscali.nl)

*You are not allowed to distribute this article or parts of this article unless you have a written consent of the author.*

perceive sensations, besides we have to learn to find words to describes all this and we have to learn how to dose the muscles' tension and their actions. It might happen that the history of their development comes to the surface in order to be worked through.

If we work with the muscles their psychological content becomes available and can be made conscious. In this way the muscles can be employed for the benefit of stress management.

Our stress response is the answer to a menace of our physical and psychological well-being. This response comes in the form of fight or flight impulse or tonic immobility. Hypotone muscles have little ability to bring a fight or flight impulse to an action, hypertone muscles put a break on the ability to come into action. If we are unable to fight or to flee we'll end up in tonic immobility, the muscles become totally slacken or they freeze. This results in powerlessness and despair, both stress raising factors.

In the case of hypotone muscles we train them by giving resistance on fight or flight actions to an extent that an average effort is required, whereby no feelings of powerlessness are activated. When the muscles are performing this effort for a certain time, experiences of vividness and awareness of the muscles are activated. This causes an experience of control, which is in itself stress diminishing. This way hope of improvement is also activated, which works stress reducing also. The higher level of mobilization of the body results in more physical activity, which makes it possible to return to a stage of rest and relaxation.

In the case of hypertone muscles we also give resistance on the relevant movement. After a short while of tensing the muscles we let the movement come through fully. This will teach the body to return to a level of relaxation after augmented intensity.

In case of tonic immobility we mainly look for movement and flexibility in joints and muscles. This causes the realization that one can do something, In fact we activate the possibility of fight or flight, the possibility to use the stress response. This way the basic feelings of security become augmented. In the long run events will less quickly appear stressful to us.

Building up better abilities of coping with social and psychological stress consists of several facets:

Firstly the ability of handling the higher energy levels of the stress response. This implies the presence of a ground, good enough to stand on, a body with enough containment function to be able to hold it's energy, awareness of centre in order not to loose one's identification with one's body and one's feelings, enough cognitive understanding to be able to evaluate events and reactions, plus the ability to balance, which means measuring and weighing.

Secondly the ability to return to a level of rest. This implies that one is able to perceive and name sensations, in order to know what is needed to return to a quiet state. To be able to return to rest or tranquillity it is useful to know how you can influence your breathing and your muscle tension by exercise and also by looking for people or situations that can calm you down (examples are: contact, touch or - on the opposite - seclusion) In this matter mastering the arts of setting boundaries and of balancing are very important.

A third facet is appraisal of the stressor. Is there a real menace to your well-being or is your interpretation incorrect, by which you provoke agitation and emotions? Grounding in reality and cognitive skills are important abilities with relation to that purpose.

A fourth important facet is security; being aware of the signs of what is safe, knowing who are safe persons, what is a safe place. Interpersonal skills and the ability to set boundaries are important functions in order to experience enough basic security.

In short, you have to be able to make efforts, to be able to relax yourself and to know how to evaluate the use of making a certain effort in a given situation. In addition it is important that you know how to find safety.

Working with ego functions can help to handle more energy and stay present with it without being energetically and emotionally overwhelmed. This makes awareness of your impulses possible, as a result of which you keep more choices concerning your acts. You can also learn to raise or bring down your energy level, depending on the current situation. Working with hyper- and hypotone muscles can teach us to regulate the amount of charge in our system; we can fortify the physical container function for energy and emotions, or respectively we can activate expression of movements and emotions, in order to lower the body's charge.

*Within two days Roger has to give a lecture for an audience of 300 international colleagues. It's exciting [perceived inner feelings ], he knows that by noticing his shoulder muscles are a little tense[inner sensations]. But it gives him a lot of pleasure too. It's a challenge. His tension helps him to stay concentrated while preparing. [higher muscle tension supports containment of higher energy levels of the stress response, his stress response is useful, it helps him to concentrate on what he should do]*

*His publisher calls: tomorrow night he has to perform in a TV talk show to promote his book. Roger feels how his breathing and his heart rate accelerate, how the blood rises to his head. [inner sensations, stress response] This TV performance will cost him a lot of time and on top of that he will have to concentrate on something different from his lecture. [verbal consideration of menace] He starts feeling anxious [emotion], his TV performance as well as his lecture may fail now.*

*He realises his fear. [observing ego]He weighs what seems important to him. [cognitive skills, setting boundaries, positioning, centring and social balance] and he then tells his publisher that unfortunately he'll have to refuse the TV performance, because he wants to prepare his lecture well. [contact, interpersonal skills]*

*His publisher objects that this is a wonderful chance to stimulate the selling figures of his book. For a moment Roger feels his heart leap: would he spoil his own case?[stress response] Then he feels how his muscles are tensing through his entire body, he feels his fast breathing. [inner sensations] He realizes how much his stress levels would rise if he agreed to have his preparations disturbed. [observing ego, cognitive skills] Subsequently he tells his publisher about his realizations and he asks him to try and renegotiate the possibility of taking part in the talk show at another moment. [energy management, interpersonal skills, boundaries, centring and staying power] His publisher answers that he'll do his utmost and puts down the receiver.*

*Roger takes a deep breath and walks around the block. His breathing calms down, as his heart rhythm does and his muscles start to relax again [energy management, bring down energy level and come back to rest] Well, now he is able to go on and prepare for his presentation.*

In the above example we recognize many ego functions. In practice we start the resourcing work with a basic set of ego functions. They are: II centring; IV boundaries; V grounding and reality test; VI balancing VIII energy management and X pattern of interpersonal skills.

## **Conclusion:**

© Lidy Evertsen. Tel. +31-20 6712099 Email: amever@tiscali.nl

You are not allowed to distribute this article or parts of this article unless you have a written consent of the author.

Being able to mobilize your stress response in order to reach your goals and deal with occurring situations is a necessity. The belonging augmentation of energy level is part of living fully and of the possibility to experience yourself as an active being. Knowing that you can do this contributes to a feeling of dignity.

But it is as important to be able to return to a state of rest. By means of working with the ego functions, like we do in the Bodydynamic System, it is possible to develop the ability to raise energy as well as to bring it down to a stage of rest and tranquillity. Awareness of this ability causes a deeper feeling of control and choice, which in itself works stress reducing too.

### **Literature:**

If you want to read more, especially on the physiological and neurological aspects of stress, you can find a small selection below from the enormous amount of books and articles available on these subjects:

- \*Robert Sapolsky: Why Zebra's don't get ulcers (W.H.Freeman & co.1998)
- \*Robert Sapolsky: Taming stress (Scientific American sept. 2003)
- \*website: [www.sciam.com](http://www.sciam.com)
- \*website Sapolsky about stress:  
<http://news-service.stanford.edu/news/2007/march7/sapolskysr-030707.html>
- \*Michael Gershon: The second Brain (HarperCollins 1998)
- \*Daniel Goleman: Emotional Intelligence (1995)
- \*Daniel Goleman: Vital lies. simple truths. *The psychology of self-deception* 1985, 2001
- \*website Goleman: <http://www.danielgoleman.info/blog/>
- \*Louis Cozolino: The Neuroscience of Psychotherapy: Building and Rebuilding the Human Brain (W.W.Norton&co. 2002)
- \*Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini & Richard Lannon: A general theory of Love (Vintage Books 2000)
- \*Kerstin Uvnas Moberg: The Oxytocin Factor: Tapping the Hormone of Calm, Love, and Healing (Perseus Books 2003)
- \*website oxytocine: <http://oxytocin.org/index.html>

Should you be interested in reading how our relatives, the other primates, deal with different stressors:

- \*Frans de Waal: Chimpanzee politics (1982)
- \*Frans de Waal: The ape and the sushi master (2001)
- \*Frans de Waal: Good natured (1996)
- \*Frans de Waal: Our inner Ape (Penguin/Riverhead 2005)
- \*website containing book information Frans de Waal:  
[http://www.emory.edu/LIVING\\_LINKS/books.html](http://www.emory.edu/LIVING_LINKS/books.html)
- \*website containing lecture on video: <http://tinbergen.gorlaeus.net/?pagina=lezingen>

More Bodydynamic lectue:

- \*Ian McNaughton: Body, breath and consciousness (North Atlantic Books, CA, 2004. ISBN: 1-55643-496-0)
- \*Merete Holm Brantbjerg, Ditte Marcher & Marianne Kristiansen: Resources in coping with shock (Kreatik Publishing, ISBN: 87-985615-8-8)

© Lidy Evertsen. Tel. +31-20 6712099 Email: [amever@tiscali.nl](mailto:amever@tiscali.nl)

You are not allowed to distribute this article or parts of this article unless you have a written consent of the author.

\*website Bodynamic Nederland: [www.bodynamic.nl](http://www.bodynamic.nl)

button “info voor professionals”

Bodynamic Canada: [www.bodynamic.ca](http://www.bodynamic.ca)

Bodynamic Denmark: [www.bodynamic.dk](http://www.bodynamic.dk)

Bodynamic Germany: [www.bodynamic.de](http://www.bodynamic.de)

Bodynamic Norway: [www.bodynamicskandinavien.com](http://www.bodynamicskandinavien.com)

Bodynamic USA: [www.bodynamicusa.com](http://www.bodynamicusa.com)

Bodynamic USA: [www.bodynamic.us](http://www.bodynamic.us)

---

**Amsterdam, summer 2007.**