

The Willamette Galley

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The STC Program Meeting of January 16th, 2003 ***Stress Management for Stressed-Out Professionals***

By Erica Coco

I attended my first chapter meeting as a newly-minted STC member on January 16th, 2003. The night's topic was *Stress Management for Stressed-Out Professionals*, lead by inspirational speaker Nancy Hopps, pictured at the right. Not a bad deal, I thought æ just joined up, and already I'm rewarded with a night of fun and relaxation!



In all seriousness, I was quite interested in the topic at hand. With high unemployment rates and uncertain times affecting nearly all of us, it is more important than ever to learn to take care of yourself; to relax, refresh, and renew. For those of you who are still employed but are now doing the work of three people, the brief time spent recharging your batteries can prove especially valuable.

The speaker, Nancy Hopps, is a seasoned professional, having spent the last twenty years developing her techniques and guiding thousands of students, clients and workshop participants. Her presentation was quite simple, yet effective. She began by discussing her recent trip to Bali. She talked about the relaxed pace of life in the islands, how good it felt to take life at a leisurely pace, and how foreign that type of lifestyle is to Westerners. Most interestingly, she discussed how the brain doesn't really know whether or not you are truly in Bali; rather, the brain believes what you tell it to believe! If you visualize yourself in Bali, relaxing in the warm sun, your brain will tell your body that you are in Bali, and your body will relax and reap the very same benefits as actually being there. This is great news for all of us living in the Northwest during the winter, with no hope of hopping on a plane and visiting an exotic island anytime soon!

"I choose to make love or my desire stronger than my fear."

More than a mantra, Nancy interwove this statement throughout the entire session to remind us that living in a state of fear and worry is the surest way to become tired, sick, and burned out. She believes that when our love or desire motivates us, rather than fear or avoidance, we truly relax and embrace the opportunities presented to us. Quick relaxation techniques are beneficial in the short run; however, to truly change your life, you must try to live for what inspires you.

Guided Relaxation

Nancy soon segued into the main part of her presentation, which made optimal use of her magnetic, soothing voice. First, she asked if anyone had worked out or done

stretches that day. Not one of us had. To limber us up and prepare our bodies for the relaxation exercises, she first led us through a series of stretches and warm-ups. She then took us through a sequence of deep breathing exercises. Nancy Hopps believes strongly in the power of deep breathing as “an incredibly powerful tool” for helping individuals release pent-up emotions and reach a state of complete relaxation.

While I had done deep-breathing exercises before, I had never encountered the technique she espoused. You are asked to imagine that you are breathing through a straw; first you take a deep breath in, and then you breathe out through the straw, letting your abdomen completely deflate. Admittedly, I got a bit light-headed at first. However, as I became more used to taking in extra oxygen, I began to feel more alert, yet more relaxed. Nancy discussed the way babies and children naturally take in deep, cleansing breaths, while adults often restrict their breathing, especially during stressful times. She believes if you have time for nothing else, make time to relax and take in deep, steady, relaxing breaths, and your body will thank you for it.

Nancy accompanied the breathing exercises with guided meditation techniques. She had us relax every part of our bodies, from our toes to the tops of our heads. She even integrated the raucous sounds of the meeting next door into the exercise. Instead of trying to ignore the noise, we simply learned to incorporate the sounds into our meditation, while letting go of all our concerns and cares. I tend to be easily distracted, yet I was able to relax and not be bothered by the ambient noise in the meeting room. This relaxation technique should prove extremely practical for the “stressed out professionals” working in hectic environments, or living in busy households where getting even one hour of peace and quiet can be difficult.

The Three Receptacles

Toward the end of the session we were taught a method for clearing our minds and sharpening our focus. Nancy told us to visualize our past, present, and future as occupying three separate receptacles. Then, we gathered together all the free-floating thoughts in our heads, and placed them in the appropriate containers. When we finished, we had to make a rough tally of how many of our thoughts belonged in the Past receptacle. Once these thoughts about the past were safely stored in their container, we told ourselves that there was nothing to be done about them; they were now safely stored away, and we could revisit them later, at a better time. Thoughts of the future were treated similarly; we asked ourselves if there was anything we could do about our future concerns at this time. If the answer was “no” we put those thoughts in their proper container. Thus, the thoughts left over were those that concerned the present. We then placed these thoughts in the Present receptacle. Unhindered by scattered thoughts about what we should-have-done, or ought-to-do, we could now concentrate on what needs to be done in the present.

In fact, I am one of those people who tend to spend a lot of mental energy on “what-ifs”. More than anything else, I know that mastering this particular exercise would help me become better focused and more organized.

The Silent Scream

We wrapped up the session with one of Nancy’s most popular relaxation techniques, “the silent scream”. The idea behind “the silent scream” is that the same physiological benefits derived by actually screaming and releasing pent-up emotion can be gotten by merely going through the motions of screaming. To do this, you

must first clench up your entire body, and contort your face into a grimace. Then, you drop your jaw, "scream" without vocalizing, wave your arms, and release all of the tension in your body. At first, I felt silly doing all of these things in public. Nonetheless, this technique proved very effective, though humorous to observe in action. (Or maybe some of its effectiveness lies in watching the other participants?) After we were done, I felt as though any remaining tension had left my body; Definitely a most practical technique for those days when you can't make it out to a remote mountaintop to scream your lungs out!

I hope to incorporate the relaxation techniques I learned that night into my own life. I probably won't do the exercises on a daily basis; however, if I can set aside just a little time every week, it should prove far more beneficial than the more typical passive relaxation techniques I've used so far, such as watching TV. And my favorite thought, gleaned from this program? "You ARE in Bali, if your brain thinks you are!"

Source

www.RelaxIntoHealing.com

Image Source

www.RelaxIntoHealing.com/ Questions and Answers for Nancy Hopps

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