

Turn on your heart light

Learn to control the 'brain in your chest'

BY **CONNIE ROETHEL**, for SBT

The term "heart light" came from the 1982 movie, "ET—The Extra-Terrestrial." Steven Spielberg's immense box office success, E.T. was the story of an alien from outer space who was stranded on earth after his spaceship had to make a fast getaway from pursuing scientists. E.T. develops a friendship with a young earth boy, Elliott. Unlike other movie versions of space aliens who attack and destroy our planet, E.T. was a beloved friend whose heart would light up when he felt warmth, love and compassion. When E.T. was captured and subject to the probing and monitoring of modern science, his heart light went out, only to be rekindled by the love of his dear friend Elliott.

The effect of E.T.'s emotions on his heart is not just the stuff of movies. Science tells us that the health of our heart has a great deal to do with how we respond emotionally to events in our lives.

Emotions such as anger, worry, impatience and hate create uneven heart rate rhythm patterns that send signals to the brain, which inhibit brain function. We are more likely to make poor decisions in this state. Positive emotions, such as appreciation, joy and love, create smooth heart rhythms that facilitate brain function, increasing mental clarity and improving performance outcomes.

We now know that positive and negative emotions are not just random functions. Bruce Wilson, a cardiologist and president of Mequon-based Wilson Heart Care Associates, uses tools created through the science of HeartMath to help his patients self-generate a coherent heart rhythm not only for heart health but to reach optimal health.

"With scientifically validated HeartMath tools, we can learn to shift our emotional state and generate positive feelings. Being able to create positive emotion is a choice and is essential to our overall health" says Wilson.

The brain in our chest

We used to think that the brain controlled everything. Wilson believes that the science was backward. He describes our past obsession with the brain as being brain centric. "This got us distracted from the real source of power. The real stuff comes from the heart. The heart signal is 50 times more powerful than the brain signal. The heart is the master pendulum, the brain in our chest."

HeartMath clinical studies have dramatically demonstrated the critical link between emotion, heart function and cognitive performance. The people at HeartMath use scientifically validated tools to track changes in patterns of the heart rhythm, referred to as heart rate variability (HRV). HRV technology tracks heart rhythm signals from the heart to our limbic system, the emotional center of our brain. The connection continues on to the cerebral cortex, our center for intellectual function, where we think and create.

Both negative and positive emotions determine our HRV. For example, when we experience anger, our stress response, referred to as the fight-or-flight response, is triggered. A whole cascade of events follows, including production of the hormone cortisol from the adrenal glands. Short periods of cortisol production are healthy and help us survive.

However, common responses to everyday stressful situations such as family, traffic and our job, not just life-threatening ones, can trigger the fight-or-flight reaction. Much of our stress comes from real or imagined threats to our social status, not threats to our lives.

Anything that threatens our sense of well-being can trigger it to some degree. If our social status, our ego, our strongly held beliefs or our desire to control things are threatened, then our fight-or-flight response sets in, whether we like it or not.

What is bad is when the fight-or-flight reaction starts to control us. Too much cortisol can be harmful.

Americans are bathing in cortisol, says Wilson, causing increases in our blood sugar, blood pressure and weight. These are the components of cardiovascular disease, hypertension, kidney disease and stroke.

We are not made to live in constant stress. This constant bath of cortisol is slowly killing us. To add to the problem, the increased levels of cortisol in the system (the bath) cause a downward spiral of negative emotions. If we bathe in cortisol long enough, we submit to despair and then depression. These negative feelings create more cortisol. This is the vicious cycle of the stress response.

The good news is that emotions can also facilitate healthy hormonal response. When we are in a positive mood and functioning at peak performance, smooth or orderly heart rhythms are present. These rhythms travel to the emotional centers of our brain, resulting in the release of positive

hormones from the adrenal glands. These hormones enhance our ability to think clearly, to make decisions, to be creative and to avoid mistakes.

In the world of work, no matter the business at hand, emotional elements play a crucial role. Daniel Goleman, author of the international best-seller, "Working With Emotional Intelligence," agrees. Goleman describes how emotions can impact the performance of a group. He calls it the group heart.

"Emotions spread. Good feelings spread more powerfully than bad ones, and the effects are more than just a glow from workers. Objective measures show groups who have experienced good feelings are more effective in ways that benefit their companies," Goleman states.

A Matter of Choice

"The ability to create positive emotions is a choice. People can be trained to use their heart signal. We can throw the switch. The tools used in HeartMath are much less expensive than endless numbers of angioplasty or heart catheterizations," Wilson says.

Freeze-Frame is one such tool. This technique was developed by Doc Lew Childre, founder of the Institute of HeartMath in Boulder Creek, Calif. It uses the power of the heart, brain, and nervous system to consciously choose our emotions. Freeze-Frame only takes a few minutes and can be done anytime, any place.

The five-step process of Freeze-Frame includes the following:

1. Recognize a stressful feeling and take time out.
2. Shift your focus of thinking away from the disturbed emotion and into the heart area.
3. Recall a fun time or positive experience you have had for at least 10 seconds.
4. Ask your heart what would be a more efficient response to the stressful situation you have experienced.
5. Let your heart give you the answer and follow what it says.



Connie Roethel, R.N., M.S.H., is president of Complementary Health & Healing Partners, (CHHP), a corporate wellness and health promotion company with offices in Mequon. She can be reached at (262) 241-9947.