

**A Grounding Exercise:
To Calm the Nervous System During Times of Stress**
Davis Phinney Foundation

Judy Long (Palliative Care Chaplain, UCSF Parkinson's Disease Supportive Care Clinic):

Bring to mind, so using your memory, bring to mind sometime in the last week when you felt I'm going to say mildly, not extremely, when you felt mildly or moderately stressed. Can you just think of a circumstance? It may be something that occurred during a doctor's visit or perhaps during a conversation with someone perhaps someone in your family but sometime when you know, "Oh that made me feel a little bit upset or a little bit stressed or a little annoyed," but whatever it was you were feeling a sense of stress and the exercise I'm going to give you is called Grounding.

Actually I'll give you a few ways and you can choose which one you like best, and grounding is so helpful because it helps actually alter or change the way our nervous system is working so that it begins to settle down. So when the nervous system understands that we're feeling upset or threatened by something the nervous system gets very intense. It can make our hearts start beating faster, it can make our breath even come a little faster, even can make our shoulders go up, that's why I was just doing that a moment ago. It can make us just feel tense, tension, stressed, all of those things we're used to. It's our nervous system responding to something the nervous system perceives as threat. Uh oh something's wrong and I better get ready to either fight or get out of the room or ignore it, do something that'll help, so that's the nervous system responding to stress.

What we want to do is see if we can remind the nervous system you know what I'm actually okay and you can settle down and when we do that then the nervous system goes into more of what we sometimes refer to popularly as going into a resilient zone. So the nervous system instead of being stuck up high like our shoulders are up high and we're stressed, it can be more relaxed and you can think of it as a very gentle wave I'll use my hand, you know that so it's not all the way up on high it's not all the way down on low it's just more relaxed. And these grounding exercises help with engaging the nervous system so that in a way that will help it to be more relaxed.

So let's start. Let me give you something to practice, I asked you to bring something to mind, I'm going to ask you to bring it to mind again. Recall that situation and on a scale of 1 to 10 where 10 is the most stressful I would like you to think of something that's at a level 4. So just moderately stressful, as I've said earlier. Remember that again. I'd like you to notice

something, if you're sitting on a chair and your legs are crossed could you please put your feet on the ground if that's comfortable for you, but even if you're lying down this still works. I would like you to notice the physical sensation of the support of the bottom of the chair under your sit bones onto your buttocks.

So I realize that was there all the time but I'm asking you to notice it right now so shift your attention again shift your attention let it drop into your body, notice the sensation of the support of the chair. If you do happen to be lying down it's okay to notice the sensation of the support of the bed or the pillow behind you but I really want you to notice that physical sensation of support. I'll give you a second to notice that because I know that's not what we usually do. All right try it again. So again let your attention come up to remember your stressful situation, and now allow your attention to drop into your body and notice the physical sensation of the support of the chair and sustain your attention there for a second or two, noticing the support of the chair.

If you like, you could even do this if you were walking, you could shift your attention now to the soles of your feet on the floor. It's why I asked you to uncross your feet and if you like you could press your feet a little bit more towards the floor and notice the sensation of the support of the floor. Again notice the sensation of the support of the floor, even while you're sitting here, see if you can pretend you're walking in place while you're sitting. So let your left foot rise up, let your right foot go down toward the floor, notice the sensation of the support of the floor and then let your left heel come down and your right foot come up and let your left, all of your foot come down, your toes.

Notice the sensation of the support of the floor. Again while you're doing that, you are, what you're doing what you're telling your brain in a very physical way is I'm okay. I'm in a safe place. Nothing's going on in here that's not safe. So the brain interestingly doesn't really get it if we just talk to it with words. If we say, "Oh brain you can be relaxed now," I don't know if that works for any of you, but when I try it my brain totally ignores me, it doesn't do anything. But what the brain understands is if your body feels secure and what this exercise does is it allows you to shift your attention to where your body feels secure and feel supported. Your brain gets that and the nervous system goes into that lovely resilient zone.

So I will say that the beauty of this is that it works. The difficult part is you actually have to do it. You can't just say, "Oh I want myself to feel that way. You really need to shift your attention, notice the sensation of the support of the chair and then your brain gets it. If you're already feeling super stressed before you do this exercise, you're already feeling really upset, I want you to remember your body is probably flooded with adrenaline and cortisol, those chemicals that make us ready to fight or run away, and they don't just disappear because we've done a grounding exercise, we need to give them a little bit of time.

So you do the exercise, which really helps, I know this from personal experience, but also we need to give our bodies a little bit of time for the adrenaline and cortisol to settle down and dissipate and you can do that by thinking of something that you enjoy. You can think about, even imagining a beautiful tree or the ocean waves or you might even like to listen to a favorite piece of music or you might like to look at a picture on the wall or you might like to imagine somebody that you love or even a religious figure that is very important in your life.

Any of those things are wonderful to go to, to help calm your mind while you're waiting, all you're doing is waiting, you're waiting for the adrenaline and cortisol to dissipate. So I'm going to give you a second part of that wonderful grounding exercise. You just learned one, it's good all by itself you don't really need another part of it, but I'm going to put another part of it with it because I find this to be very helpful.

I like to start it with a breath. I take a breath in in a particular way, which I'll tell you in a moment and then after I take that breath in I don't worry about the out breath I let it take care of itself. And during the out breath I shift my attention into my body and I notice the sensation of the support of the chair. So let's do just the breath part. When you take your next breath in I would like you to notice the sensation of, does it sound familiar, I want you to notice another sensation, notice the sensation of the air coming into your nostrils or into your throat and chest as well if you like, but primarily I want you to notice the air entering your nostrils. So when you're ready, next in breath, breathe in, notice the sensation of the air entering your nostrils, so I hope you can notice it. Let's try it again the next in breath, breathe in and notice. The idea is to feel the air entering your nostrils. One more time, breathe in and notice.

Now we'll put them together, so breathe in and notice now, and allow your attention to shift and notice the sensation of the support of the chair. So it's like a one two punch. So just do it again. On the next in-breath breathe in, notice the sensation of the air into your nostrils, and during the out breath shift your attention, notice the support of the chair.

So that's the whole thing. My suggestion is if you find that useful I suggest that you practice it when you're not stressed at all, just like you're doing it in this class with me now, because the idea is you want it to be very familiar, so you don't have to think about it, you can just do it, right, and that comes from practice. You want to do it four or five times in the morning, four or five times in the afternoon, and even four or five times before you go to sleep if you like, and let it start becoming very very familiar and then try it out when you're somewhere where you feel moderately stressed. For example, maybe in a slow grocery line, if you're doing grocery shopping, or maybe if you're feeling impatient because you're waiting for the doctor and the doctor is running late and just do it, no one knows you're doing it, and it's a great way to settle your mind again.