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Exercise and Covid: Enhancing Immunity and Expanding Consciousness

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Humanity in lockdown faces the disease challenge of the century. Medical experts the world over are attempting to manage the Covid crisis by using the tools they know best. From public health measures like masking and social distancing, to the pharmaceutical quest for a preventive vaccine, the emphasis from the medical establishment has been on the external “enemy” – the virus. They work with a model that sees symptoms and external forces as adversaries, the same model that has led to the so-far-unsuccessful wars on cancer, on drugs, on etc.

But what about the internal focus? Louis Pasteur, founder of the germ theory of disease, admitted on his deathbed that the “terrain”, the body that hosts the germs and viruses, was even more important causally than the bug itself. So what happens when we look at Covid from the terrain point of view? If the infection is a sign of imbalance, we learn that virus susceptibility depends on many factors: demographic ones like old age and pre-existing medical conditions (Verity), as well as internal factors like obesity, a fast-food diet (Hyman), lungs breathing in air pollution (Conticini), malnutrition, poverty, and stress. In this article, we’ll be focusing on the last factor – stress – but from a novel angle: using exercise to transform Covid-induced stress into empowerment and resilience.

There’s certainly been much recent attention to the stress of dealing with lockdown. We know that stress directly impairs immune function via cortisol release (the Fight-or-Flight reflex) and suppression of lymphocyte function. It’s a Catch-22: the lockdown designed to protect us from Covid is itself so stressful that it can impair our immune resistance to viruses. Fortunately, many tools are being made available to respond to Covid stress, from meditation apps to YouTube videos to Zoom exercise classes. We know that exercise is a key tool in overcoming stress, but the decreased access to usual forms of physical exercise has increased the challenge for many. So how can we deal with this enforced, if temporary, sedentary lifestyle?

What follows is a compilation of strategies and principles compiled by expert practitioners of mind/body/spirit sports training techniques. The integration of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual development being described here is the multidimensional equivalent of cross-training.

This alignment creates “Integral Fitness”, where each dimension of growth expands and enhances the others – an interactive process the Greeks called *antakolouthia* - to create a fuller, more realized person.

These techniques focus on the role of energy and consciousness in sports, and can help us deal with the physical constraints of lockdown (while gyms and playing fields are closed, access to hiking trails restricted, etc.), the emotional ones (social isolation, lack of emotional and physical contact with other humans, fear of the unknown, etc.), and the spiritual needs of a world looking death in the eye. Michael Murphy said “Sport is the yoga of the West”, because the experience of performing sports in the Zone is a transcendent experience that parallels spiritual illumination (Murphy). So this conversation about exercise and Covid is not just about aerobic capacity and strength training, it’s about aligning body, mind and spirit in the quest for Oneness. And it’s not just an incidental side-effect that this spiritual pursuit enhances immune resilience to viruses like Covid.

Getting into the Zone

Nondual awareness is the goal of many spiritual practices, and is also the end result of an approach to tennis that USPTA coach Scott Ford calls “the flowing present”. This technique is adaptable to any sport involving contact with a ball, or any life activity involving meeting an object with your attention. In other words, this altered state of consciousness can be accessed anywhere, at any time, and the benefits are as great in the living room as they are on a tennis court. Playing sports in the Zone has been linked to a wide range of positive physiologic changes (Leskowitz), ranging from autonomic stability and cortical balance (Dietrich) to enhanced stress resilience. It is the Holy Grail of sports performance, and Life can be lived there as well.

Scott Ford: This 60-second practice trains you to create what’s called a nondual visual field, the expanded visual field experienced in peak performance states. It stands in stark contrast to the constricted dualistic visual field experienced in normal performance states.

Here’s how it works. Look straight ahead and focus sequentially on three different objects in your visual field, then soften your visual focus and let it rest in the empty space directly in front of you at a comfortable arm’s length.

If you have trouble judging your visual depth of focus, just put your index finger up in front of your eyes at a comfortable arm’s distance and focus on your fingernail. Then drop your finger out of the picture but leave your eyes focused on the point where your fingernail was located. Once you’ve located that empty point in your visual field, rest your focus on it for the next 60 seconds.

It sounds easy, but it’s not. It takes practice to control your visual focus. Start by resting your focus on the emptiness of your visual field for ten seconds, then twenty, then try to rest your focus on emptiness for the full sixty seconds. You’ll get better with each try.

By *not* striving to “keep your eye on the ball”, you create a nondual visual field that leads to a nondual performance experience . Regular 60-second practice sessions of non-dual visual field training can, over time, turn into day-long experiences of playing, and living, in the Zone.

Releasing negative emotions

A major barrier to optimum sports performance, and to emotional and physical health, is the persistence of troubling emotions like anxiety, anger and shame that become trapped in the body/mind system and diminish the physical ability to perform. The techniques of energy psychology help release negative emotional states from the body/mind, whether it’s anxiety about a batting slump (Howard) or fears about Covid. This approach has been used widely by elite athletes at the college and professional level. Here is mental training coach Greg Warburton’s 3-minute practice for emotional self-management to gain a relaxed, energized body and a calm mind.

Greg Warburton: Athletes say to me, *I am tired of fighting my head and my body to stay calm. I would like something I could physically do to relax and energize my body and calm my mind.* In response, I developed the 3-Minute Body/Mind Energy warm-up that serves as a daily practice for boosting mental and emotional fitness. I say to athletes, *using this practice is much more efficient than trying to think your way to a good place when you are already upset.*

- Minutes 1 and 2: Center and balance your energy flow using the *hook-up* and *cross crawl*.

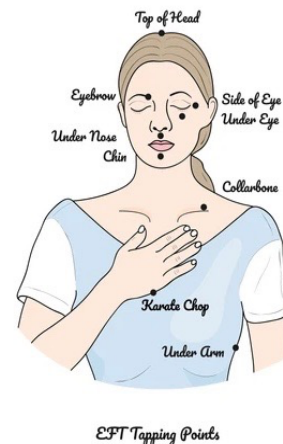
For your body-mind to function optimally, energy must cross over the midline of your body. Begin balancing the energy crossing over the mid-line with the *hook-up*. Hold this posture for 1-2 minutes while comfortably breathing. Then do the *cross-crawl* 10-12 times, alternating left elbow moving to right knee and right elbow to left knee. You can perform the hook-up and cross crawl standing up, sitting down or lying down.



Hook-up



Cross-crawl



Acupressure points

- Minute 3: Emotional Freedom Techniques. Tap the sequence of 14 acupressure points while affirming full acceptance of yourself despite any negative emotions that may be arising.

Let's keep it simple. All you are actually doing is percussing energy points to open the natural energy pathways in your body/mind system; thus, consistently achieving relaxing your body and calming your mind. I teach athletes that poor performance and emotional distress has more to do with blocked energy in your body/mind system, that it has to do with lack of determination, will power or a negative attitude. (see video for full program)

Mindfulness

Meditation has entered the American cultural mainstream, and millions of Americans (and many top athletes) now include mindfulness practices as part of their health regimen. The clinical literature documenting its efficacy for a range of conditions, including immune enhancement, is large (Black) and growing. Mindfulness may be the common denominator of all approaches that use exercise for healing, and former NFL linebacker David Meggyesy here describes a simple way to become mindfully present in each moment of time, on the gridiron or on the couch.

David Meggyesy: “Being Here and Now” is the prescription for dealing with our human condition and living our lives. Simple to say, profoundly difficult to do consistently. What we are doing with our ‘monkey minds’ is slipping off our present, oily ‘Here and Now’ rock, with thoughts, images, feelings, remembrances, thought forms, etc. -- ‘the full catastrophe’ as Zorba the Greek put it.

As athletes, being fully present opens the door to what we call the experience of Flow, the Zone, and typically stellar performance and enjoyment. And we humans are looking for this Holy Grail, just being Present, Here and Now, in our lives. Doing a ‘Being Present’ routine takes practice, just a short routine - a minute or so during the day, longer if wanted. Consistent daily practice is the key. Just a few conscious feeling breaths, feeling your body during a short body scan, will drop you in.

The exercise - ‘Getting Here and Being Here’: Sit down, feel your butt on the chair, feet on the floor, take a breath or two, release it. Close eyes. In your mind’s eye, remember where you were three hours ago and what was happening. Give this memory some detail: the situation, place, people you were dealing with, thoughts, feelings going through your mind. Take a minute or two.

Then go forward in time - a half-hour later, what is happening? Then another half hour later, what is happening? Then another, until you see yourself walking into this room, sitting down, being aware of thoughts, feelings, expectations. As you have just arrived, let them go.

Then feel your butt on the chair, feel yourself in your body. Be aware of your breathing, do a couple of breaths. Open your eyes, look around at your surroundings. Here you are! This feeling is you being Present. Being present brings many benefits. Taking this feeling of being Present into your athletic practice, your sport, and your daily life is the essential point of this exercise.

Integral Fitness and Transformative Emotions

Integral Transformative Practice (ITP) was developed by Human Potential luminaries George Leonard and Michael Murphy, and is a constellation of exercises designed to further the development of body, mind, heart and soul. This form of cross-training can serve as a long-term path toward self-realization by viewing stress as an energy that can be consciously transformed. Training in Transformative Emotions can bring you into a fuller moment-to-moment awareness, to feel the exhilaration of the flow state of consciousness.

The following exercise will increase your physical and emotional intelligence by heightening body awareness, thereby allowing you to respond more skillfully to stressful situations. The object is to create powerful, transformative emotions of your conscious choice, and is part of the practice of heartfulness. It is described here by Barry Robbins, the Vice-President of ITP-International.

Barry Robbins: Find a quiet space to relax and settle in. Journey inside your body and consider the memory of a stressful emotion that has triggered you. Notice the physical sensations that accompany this emotion. Use your fingers and hands to touch this location in your body where you are experiencing the emotion. This is how stress shows up in your body.

Now, take a deep, cleansing breath and consider a positive emotion that you'd prefer to feel instead. It may be the opposite of the stressful emotion, or something different. Then think of a time when you experienced this emotion, or create the mental image of a situation in which this emotion would arise.

Repeat the earlier practice and identify the physical sensations in the body that accompany this new emotion. The more you practice this process, the more fully the Transformative Emotion becomes embodied and the more rapidly you can bring it alive into any situation. The grid below can be used as part of your ongoing practice, to map out where each emotion shows up in your body and tie it into a memory that can become a permanent resource for handling stress.

	Stressful Emotion	Transformative Emotion
Memory		
Location in Body		
Physical Sensations		

Group connections

The emerging scientific understanding is that consciousness is an independent non-local force that connects all minds (Dossey). So our human connections arise not just via the primary social linkages we humans typically share - the love bonds with our family and friends - but also through an intangible global network of mind (Bancel). Sports reinforces this connective function for millions of Americans, whether as workout buddies, members of athletic teams, or even as fans rooting together for those teams. The impact of our current disconnection from these powerful group forces is discussed by Harvard psychiatrist Rick Leskowitz.

Rick Leskowitz: For many people, the most challenging aspect of the Covid crisis has been the enforced social disconnection, isolation and loneliness, all of which are known contributors to mental health problems (Killgore) and all of which can be ameliorated by participation in sports. So despite practicing individual activities like those outlined above, there will be no true substitutes for the crowd energy and team chemistry that sporting activities provide until the lockdown ends. During this phase of social distancing, many people are losing the social upliftment and enhanced mind/body coordination that comes from being a part of a coherently attuned group of people (see video). Pro sports leagues are struggling to adapt, but by the time this article is printed, their schedules will hopefully have returned to normal. Several matches have been held in empty stadiums, and the reaction to these preliminary trials was unanimous: “eerie”, “strangely haunting” and “deeply weird” (Ronay). The sense of shared energy and human connection was missing, and without that bond, we become ungrounded disembodied shadows.

It may be that disconnection from this intangible group energy is the one truly irreplaceable loss created by the lockdown. There’s no substitute for the hugs of friends and family, the high fives of teammates (and opponents!), the love that is so much a part of sports participation and life itself (Dorland). These energetic connections will soon return to our lives, but in the meanwhile, the multi-dimensional integral training techniques described here can help us decrease our stress, enhance our immune resilience, and show us how to thrive during these strange times of the Covid pandemic.

About the authors:

- David Meggyesy was a linebacker for the St. Louis Cardinals in the NFL, but his career ended in 1969 after he engaged in the first on-field protest for social justice by an American professional athlete. He co-founded the Esalen Sports Center, and for many years was a Regional Director of the NFL Players Association. His book “Out of Their League” was named to the Top 100 sports books of all time by Sports Illustrated, and he is an Adviser to the Harvard Football Players Health Study.
- Greg Warburton MS is an author and sports performance mental-training coach, and is one of the world's pioneers in applying Energy Psychology techniques in sport. He has worked for many years with the perennial Division I baseball national champions from Oregon State

University. ESPN broadcasts at the College World Series in 2007 and 2013 featured athletes Warburton was working with using his EFT tapping protocol during the games.

- Barry Robbins was a nationally ranked athlete and First-Team All-American fast-pitch softball player before training with George Leonard in ITP and becoming the lineage holder and Vice President of ITP International. Each year, he and several ex-PGA pros coordinate a golf tournament featuring the use of blindfolds to cultivate inner attunement.
- Scott Ford is certified as an elite level coach by the US Professional Tennis Association. He has coached tennis pros, college students, Navy SEALs, and consciousness students, and has given coaching seminars around the world on his parallel mode process to “get in the Zone by choice, not by chance”.
- Dr. Eric Leskowitz is more of a sports fan than an athlete. He produced a baseball-themed documentary for PBS about group energies in sports, called “The Joy of Sox: Weird Science and the Power of Intention”. He worked for 25 years with chronic pain patients in the Harvard-affiliated pain clinic at Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital in Boston.

Resources:

- Teaching videos

Scott Ford – The Flowing Present (18 min.):

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=461&v=XCFQf8YUSYo&feature=emb_logo

Greg Warburton – Daily Pandemic Energy Warm-up (21 min.):

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=30&v=-tT4h22EiQA&feature=emb_logo

Group energy entrainment (6 min.): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=72DtbK2EVcI>

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- Websites

Greg Warburton: gregwarburton.com

Scott Ford: tennisinthezone.com

David Meggyesy: davidmeggyesy.com

Evolutionary Sports Collective: <https://evosportscollective.com/>

Global Consciousness Project: noosphere.princeton.edu

ITP International: <https://www.itp-international.org/>

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