



# What WORKS



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## Balance and Clarify

Two words summarize what I have found to be consistently helpful in over thirty years of counseling and teaching stress management; Balance and Clarify.

Everything is easier when you're in balance. Everything is harder when you're not. Balance allows you to respond rather than react. It also allows you to see and think clearly. Things are more likely to turn out better when your thoughts, perceptions, and values are clear and less likely when they're not. Clarifying prevents misunderstanding, reduces mistakes, and insures that you are taking care of what's most important.

Balance and Clarify. It sounds simple. Actually, it is - when you start with balance. The most important part of balance is getting rid of tension. Tension is one of the main reasons why stress creates so many problems. It's like sunburn. A slight bump that's no big deal under normal circumstances can create a huge outburst when you're badly sunburned.

Tension is like holding your foot on the accelerator when your car is in "Park." It wears out your engine and transmission, uses up all your fuel, and you don't go anywhere. If the car does slip into gear, you take off in a big hurry with little control over what you run into.

I ask my students to describe what their lives are like when there's a lot of tension. Common responses include being "cranky," "impatient," "restless," "frazzled," "forgetful," "self-centered," and "rude." They have trouble learning, organizing, sleeping, digesting, and resting. They tend to "snap" at others, have difficulty concentrating, and feel overwhelmed and exhausted. When these same students

described their lives without tension, they used words like "calm," "peaceful," "pleasant," "creative," and "at ease." They wrote that they are "fun to be around," "laugh a lot," and are "more open and active." They report being "able to focus better and make the best out of difficult situations."

Tension gears up our muscles for action and creates a sense of hurry when there is no need for it. It narrows our focus and interferes with understanding and learning. (A mind that's rushing forward or bouncing back and forth between "should" and "should've" tends not to remember details or gain new insights)

Building up tension is not a natural process. It is the result of instinct that has survival value in the wild but works against us in modern life. When an animal in the wild perceives a threat, it gets an extra burst of energy to its muscles to deal with the threat. That's a good thing if you're being chased by a bear, but if you're late for a meeting and caught in traffic (or experiencing one of hundreds of other stressors that humans tend to perceive as threatening), your muscles hold back the extra energy. That builds tension.

The next articles in this series will explain how this works and what you can do about it in simple terms. (This information is also available in an article titled, "Understanding Stress" which can be viewed under the Stress Management tab at [www.bobvanoosterhout.com](http://www.bobvanoosterhout.com))

Physical exercise and relaxation are often offered as solutions for managing stress. My experience is that they're effective in restoring balance from short-term stress but have little impact on tension that has built

up over days, weeks, or years. I have worked with college and professional athletes who work out every day but still experience high stress. I have heard stories of people who have a wonderful, relaxing experience and then erupt into road rage when someone cuts them off on the way home.

Being aware of the effects of tension and the need for balance is an important first step. People who make balance a high priority live more effective, satisfying, and fulfilling lives. They tend to be healthier and live longer than stressed out counterparts.

Recognizing when tension starts to build allows you to regain balance. A short break can make all the difference in the world in how you react to a stressful situation. A student described taking "30 seconds to breathe" after realizing something had gone terribly wrong. She described how she made the best choices possible under



the circumstances and wrote “Even though I am in a very high pressure time at work, I have been maintaining my balance and that allowed me to take this in stride.”

Getting proper rest is necessary to function at your best. Research shows that people who have been awake and active for 18 hours perform at about the same level as those who are legally drunk. Getting by on 6 hours or less sleep for two weeks has a similar effect. A recent poll found that 63% of Americans reported that they start their work week without feeling rested.

When you recognize the need for balance and prevent tension from building, you are more able to clarify. You can discern the nature of a situation and whether it is a long or a short-term problem. (When there’s a lot of tension, everything seems like a short-term problem)

Clarifying involves looking at issues from a variety of perspectives, seeing what choices are available, and considering what the likely effects might be. If there is a mistake or misunderstanding, clarifying allows you to correct it and learn from it.

When you are thinking clearly, you recognize that blame, judgment, worry, and a lack of understanding of other’s feelings and views tends to lead to more problems. You

also realize that being convinced you’re absolutely right is the opposite of clarifying. When you regularly balance and clarify, you’re more likely to be organized and prepared, and less likely to lose patience, fly off the handle, and say or do things that are damaging and hurtful. You can more easily adapt to changing circumstances and are more able to recognize opportunities and creative solutions.

When balancing and clarifying become habits, you learn to manage crises, pain, and loss more effectively. Work becomes more productive, relationships more satisfying, and there is a growing realization of the wondrous, beautiful world we live in.

Balance and clarify. That’s what works. It’s something you can do to take charge of your health.

### About Bob Van Oosterhout

Bob Van Oosterhout is a Licensed Masters Social Worker and Limited Licensed Psychologist who provides counseling to patients at MidMichigan Health Park - Houghton Lake. He teaches Stress Management both on-line and on-campus in the Physical Fitness and Wellness Department at Lansing Community College. Additional writing and resources along with previous and future articles in this series can be found on his website at

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