

imagery. Using biofeedback devices and a type of hypnosis called self-regulation, they learn to control their heart rate, blood pressure and other stress-sensitive physiological functions. In relaxed breathing, the focus is on learning to breathe from your diaphragm in order to transport more oxygen to your red blood cells; in guided imagery, you relax by imagining yourself lying on, say, a warm, sandy beach. Patients also rediscover their creative side via drawing, dance and writing.

"Most participants experience a significant decrease in anxiety and physical symptoms," says James Gordon, M.D., the center's director. "They feel more in control of their lives."

Feeling out of control is itself a major stressor, says Allen Elkin, author of *Stress Management for Dummies* (Hungry Minds; \$19.99). If a situation stresses you out, try to change it. Can't be done? Try changing your perception (is the glass half empty or half full?). When all else fails, take a deep breath and smile (that relaxes the body).

So the next time you're slated to meet a friend uptown for after-work drinks, leave ten minutes early and walk there. Sure, ideally you'd be strolling in a pine-scented forest, but look on the bright side: you're getting some exercise, and you've freed yourself from the vagaries of rush-hour traffic. You're in control. See? I bet you feel better already.

My First Massage

I'd never had one before, but when life got the better of me, I was instinctively drawn to the healing power of touch. By John Sedgwick

At first I thought I was feeling music: a great Liszt glissando skittering down my spine, or maybe the Kyrie from Mozart's Requiem, with its soaring voices. But no, it was Jennifer's hands on me, sliding from my shoulder, down my side, to the small of my back. Jennifer stepped so quietly around the massage table that I scarcely sensed her as a corporeal presence at all. As my mind started to swim with heavenly sensation, I decided those weren't her hands at all—or even Mozart's—but God's.

Massage will do that—get you to spin elaborate metaphors, extravagant conceits. Even more than psychotherapy, it gets inside of you to where the hurt is, then kisses it, caresses it, forgives it and lets it go. The least respected of the five senses, touch is the most magical: it assures us that we live in the land of rapture and that, more important, we are not alone. Babies fail to thrive without touch; the elderly are starved for it.

And Lord knows I needed it. I'd gone through a miserable few months, suffering a major postpartum depression after the publication of my first novel. Even after Prozac pulled me out of the ditch, I found myself craving human contact of the most literal sort. The worst part of depression, you see, is the isolation, the sense that you've become an Untouchable, that

Stress Busters

- Take a walk with no destination in mind.
- Indulge in a jasmine-scented bubble bath.
- Ban loud, offensive music from your house.
- Do a two-day "news fast" — no newspapers, TV or radio.
- Breathe. Sit or lie down; place your tongue tip behind your upper front teeth. Exhale through your mouth; close it; inhale through your nose for four counts; hold your breath for seven; exhale orally for eight. Repeat four times.
- Get a pet—or if you have one, pet it often. Simply stroking a pet lowers your blood pressure.
- Watch a funny movie. In one survey, heart-attack survivors who watched comedy videos for thirty minutes daily cut the risk of another attack by 20 percent.
- Have faith in something. "Belief is one of our bodies' most powerful healing effects," says Herbert Benson, M.D.

you need to crawl into a hole somewhere. Talk about stress. My mood rose, thankfully, but the longing persisted. I became almost alarmingly outgoing. My wife, friends and children have been receptive to my huggy advances, and my dog has never received such attention.

But I knew what I really needed was... massage. Massage! The sweet slippery-slide of it, especially around the shoulder blades and lower back, where Jennifer later told me I seem to carry a lot of tension. I was especially partial to the tingly sensuousness of her foot massage, the near-tickle of the deep strokes she gave my quads. It was amazing to feel her working over some tightness in my back—rather like a dentist fussing with a soft spot in a rear molar, but with the difference that she made it better just by her touch.

I'd never had a professional massage before, surprisingly enough, for a man of my disposition. I was ready to love it, but not to float, to find that so much swirling sensation can remove a person from his body altogether. It lifted me, briefly, out of myself and into the sublime. The massage took an hour, but it seemed to pass in a twinkling. Still, when it was over, I felt—aside from the sadness that such bliss must end—loved. ✕