

Meditation for the CT surgeons

Our experience with meditation is that most surgeons feel that they either don't have time for it, that it is too "woo woo" or that it really doesn't help them in any substantive way. In fact, for some, the thought of meditation can be activating. Recently, professional athletes like LeBron James and Tiger Woods have lauded the value of a consistent practice of mind calming breathing routines to enhance their performance. Let me suggest a couple of techniques that CT surgeons might find useful as ways to prepare for a case or to manage stressful situations in the moment.

Technique One: The professional golfer, Davis Love III described advice his father, Davis Love Jr., also a professional golfer, once gave him. "Never let your golf game determine your mood. Let your mood determine your golf game." This advice is about the power of preparation and centering; and surgeons can apply it to their daily life. Prior to performing surgery, I make sure to carve out some "sacred" time to be with myself. I like to remind people that being "with" yourself is not the same as being "by" yourself. Usually, I will sit quietly in my office until I know they will be ready for me in the OR, but sometimes, I can find a place to walk (I prefer sitting quietly because walking does raise the heart rate a bit, but for some, walking is a valuable distraction that helps them focus better on their thoughts—in much the same way as walking a labyrinth can be relaxing). I usually begin by thinking about the upcoming case, visualizing each step and imagining what I might need and how I might react to unexpected developments. This often helps me during the "time out" when I can make sure the OR staff has any additional supplies or equipment I might need. Then, I spend time just breathing and noticing, (in a non-judgmental way,) how noisy my mind might be. With my breathing, I bring myself into a more centered state. I like to end by breathing into a few phrases:

- May I be happy (and breathe into my yearning for this)
- May I be healthy and strong (and breathe into my renewed health following my experience with cancer)
- May I be safe and free from danger (and breathe into my gratitude that I live in a place of safety)
- May I be at ease within myself and in the world around me; (As I breathe into that last phrase, I consciously try to breathe out any "dis-ease" that may be inside me and breathe in "ease" and a sense of centeredness. I spend time with this until I am genuinely and completely at ease.)

When I am ready, I take that sense of centeredness into the OR with me and let my mood determine how the rest of

the day will unfold. Through the power of co-regulation, my mood influences my team and it makes a difference to all of us.

Technique Two: There is a lot of emerging science on the importance of self-regulation for achieving peak performance. Many of us know that when we get dysregulated, our prefrontal cortex shuts down; we begin to function in a more primitive survival pattern and we aren't at our best. I have developed a technique, drawing from the work of many experienced meditators, that has been helpful for me and several of my colleagues.

Spend some time in a quiet and safe space. Imagine one of your favorite places. As you connect your thoughts to this place, breathe into how it feels when you are in this place. Settle in that place in your mind as you breathe into the peacefulness and joy that this special place provides you. Linger with that feeling and connect to your oneness with this wonderful place. Feel the air as you allow this place to embrace and envelop you with comfort and breathe into the gratitude that you have for finding this place on this Earth. As you spend time in this place, continue to breathe and put your hand over your heart and sense the truly heart-felt love that is there for this place. Now, imagine that perhaps this place is as fond of you as you are of it, and it misses you when you are gone and has enormous delight each time you return. It longs to hear your stories of where you have been and what you have experienced, since it is not capable of travel except through its connection with you. Revel in the delight that you and this place have for each other and breathe into that feeling. When you are ready, you can open your eyes and return to your present place, but bring with you the gift that your special place has given to you of belonging and of feeling at ease. And take that feeling with you as you go to meet the challenges of your day.

In time, you will learn how to recreate that feeling within moments (and we have taught people how to do this with biofeedback devices). When I get stressed in the OR, I can regulate myself quickly by connecting to what it feels like to be in my favorite place, sometimes just putting my hand over my heart to recall that unique centeredness. And in so doing, I have reset myself and am now prepared for the challenge at hand.

If you find these suggestions helpful, we can offer future contributions to expand your newfound skills in managing other challenges that confront CT surgeons, such as coping with failure, struggle or loss.

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