

Peper, E., Sato-Perry, K & Gibney, K. H. (2003). Achieving health: A 14-session structured stress management program—Eczema as a case illustration. Presented at the 34<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Association for Applied Psychophysiology and Biofeedback. Abstract in: *Applied Psychophysiology and Biofeedback*, 28(4), 308

### **Achieving Health: A 14-Session Structured Stress Management Program— Eczema as a Case Illustration**

Erik Peper

Keiko Sato-Perry  
San Francisco State University

Katherine H. Gibney

*My only wish for the self-healing project is that I had started sooner: Months and months ago.*

--student

Stressors and an individual's stress reaction may act as an initiator, promoter, or co-factor in the development of and recovery from illness (Sapolsky, 1998). Awareness of one's stress reaction coupled with mastery of physiological reactivity and conscious changes in behavior and attitude appear to be useful self-regulation approaches to mobilize health. We propose that therapists and teachers include a structured educational stress management program to complement their biofeedback and training protocols for enhancing clients'/students' self-healing potentials. This paper provides an overview of a structured 14-session regenerative program that can be used to guide individuals or groups to practice at home and work. Emphasis is on active participation in one's own self-healing, which is essential for reducing mental/emotional blocks that may interfere with regeneration.

#### **Background of the Make Health Happen Program**

Each semester (since 1976) San Francisco State University enrolls more than 100 undergraduates in an interdisciplinary class covering Western Perspectives of Holistic Health in which students participate in a stress management and self-healing program. The curriculum includes lectures, required reading, written papers and exams, as well as daily experiential practices within a structured program. The cascading sequences of practices are comprised of awareness of stress, dynamic regeneration, cognitive stress reduction, imagery for healing, and behavior change. The course culminates in a self-healing project in which the student works on a personal health concern and develops and implements a self-healing plan, which generally includes imagery and behavior change.

The program demands active participation. The more you put into it, the more you practice, the more you will gain. Learning awareness, relaxation, stress management, acceptance, and control over thoughts and emotions takes time. It is in the practice and personal experience that change occurs—in belief systems and in health.

#### **Benefits of the Make Health Happen Program**

Although many of our students have reported benefits when they practice only a few times, most report that the process of awareness, change, and growth is similar to developing or learning any new skill. The systematic teaching of this program to hundreds of students has resulted in an improvement in their self-reported health and well-being. In the most recent anonymous

assessment at the end of a semester program with 109 students (average age 25.7; range 18-57), most reported that their self-healing projects were successful as shown in Figure 1. Goals included stopping smoking, increasing exercise, eliminating warts, reducing back pain, lowering depression, changing diet, controlling anger or anxiety, and reducing eczema.



Figure 1. Students' self-rating of the benefits of practicing their self-healing project.

One indicator of the efficacy of the program can be an increase in peripheral temperature. Nearly all participants learned to warm their hands, which resulted in a concurrent reduction in subjective stress levels. For example, when physical therapists were guided through these practices, the average hand temperature increased from 85.3° to 95.4° Fahrenheit. Similarly, university students reported an average increase of 8.8° Fahrenheit in hand temperature with a reduction in subjective stress levels from 4.3 to 2.2 (on a scale from 0-relaxed to 9-tense) as shown in Figures 2 and 3.

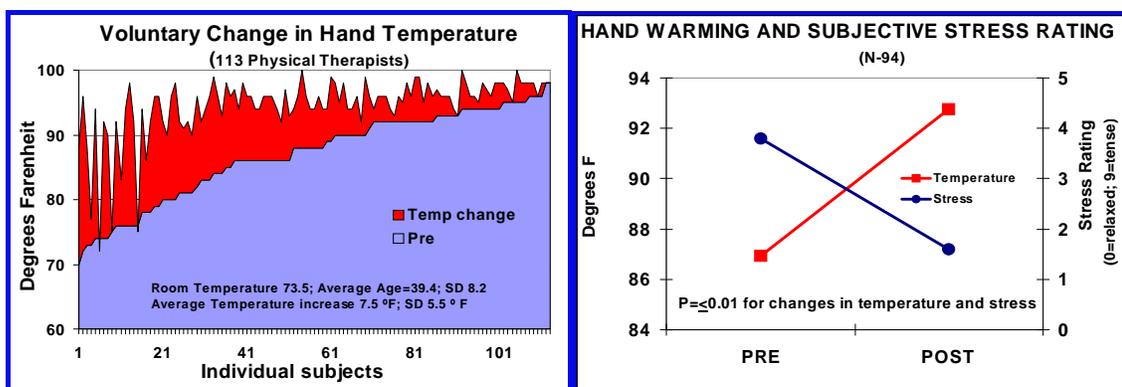


Figure 2. Physical therapists' success at hand warming

Figure 3. College students' success at hand warming and resultant decrease in stress

Experiencing and mastering voluntary hand warming is a tool to shift the participant's beliefs—they have a personal experience of the mind-body interconnectedness. The dawning realization that for every thought and feeling there is a corresponding somatic change and visa versa helped participants broaden their understanding of mind/body communication. In experiencing the mastery of temperature change, they know they have some control and need not be powerless

when their body acts up. As one student said: *I feel incredibly relaxed right now, and somewhat surprised that I raised my hand temperature 26 degrees.*

A significant component of the program is the use of imagery for self-healing. Imagery appears to be the communication channel between the conscious/voluntary and the unconscious/autonomic/involuntary nervous system. It appears to act as the template and post-hypnotic suggestion to implement behavior change and may offer insight and ways to mobilize the self-healing potential. Imagery is dynamic and changeable. For most participants, imagery was the most powerful tool for improving health. Images were incorporated in self-healing for conditions that ranged from changing behavior (e.g., stopping smoking) to life-threatening disease (e.g., kidney transplant and HIV). The following self-healing project illustrates the richness of imagery and its powerful use in healing.

### **Self-Healing Imagery for Eczema**

A 36-year old married woman had eczema and hair pulling trichotillomania (TTM), one type of obsessive-compulsive behavior, for more than 20 years. She observed that pulling hair was secondary to the primary habit of peeling scabs from her scalp eczema. TTM became a compulsion over which she felt little control. During the class, she kept a detailed log of when she picked her scalp. She observed that there was a concomitant habit of negative and critical thinking. She also observed that her hand involuntarily touched her hair and scalp especially when reading, driving, working on a computer, and after social interaction. Her self-healing strategy included:

- Decreasing my stress by exercising and relaxation
- Changing my thoughts to be more positive and hopeful
- Working with imagery, learning more about my problem and dialoguing with it
- Investigating and resolving stressors from my past.
- Writing journal entries to be more conscious of my behavior
- Exploring alternative ways for my hands to touch and play other than touching my scalp
- Gaining a greater sense of autonomy by saying no to the world—even "f--- you" if necessary (!)—and stating my preference
- Writing down my self-talk and keeping a log
- Massaging my scalp with aloe vera after shampooing
- Conducting online research about TTM
- Drawing my personal imagery of the disease and my sense of healing and wholeness
- Before and during reading: holding a relaxing posture, adjusting lighting, playing music, stretching, having a nice cup of tea
- Before driving: smelling lavender oil, cleaning the windshield and seats, playing music, and practicing Quiet Response (QR).

Her self-healing project incorporated a number of different images that consisted of inspection of the problem, the self-healing process, and wholeness or health, as shown in figure 3.

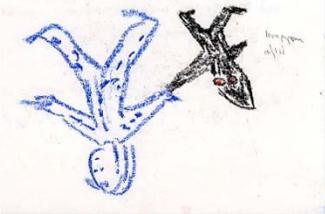
		
<p><b>Inspection of problem:</b> A little girl crying because her mother and friends were nagging at her</p>	<p><b>Self-healing process:</b> Divine hands touch my head and send strength and dignity through my body</p>	<p><b>Wholeness or health:</b> There are rays of light communicating between the world and me. I have a strong backbone and humor to laugh at negativity</p>
		
<p><b>Inspection of the problem:</b> A little monster controlling me and pulling me at its own will. It wears a black hood through which its bright eyes show. My body is not intact with its circulation disrupted as shown in blue dots.</p>	<p><b>Healing process:</b> I take off the black hood and robe. I then sat down at its height, listening and communicating. Bright light comes out and there is a child under the black outfit.</p>	<p><b>Wholeness or health:</b> I give this innocent and loving child a piggyback. We are in harmony.</p>

Figure 4. Example of self-healing imagery.

She successfully decreased the number of scabs significantly (from 53 to 12) and also decreased the number of times she picked her scabs (from 99 times to 0) within 25 days of beginning her self-healing practice as shown in Figure 5. Integral to this self-healing project were an openness to experience, a commitment to practice, and self-acceptance.

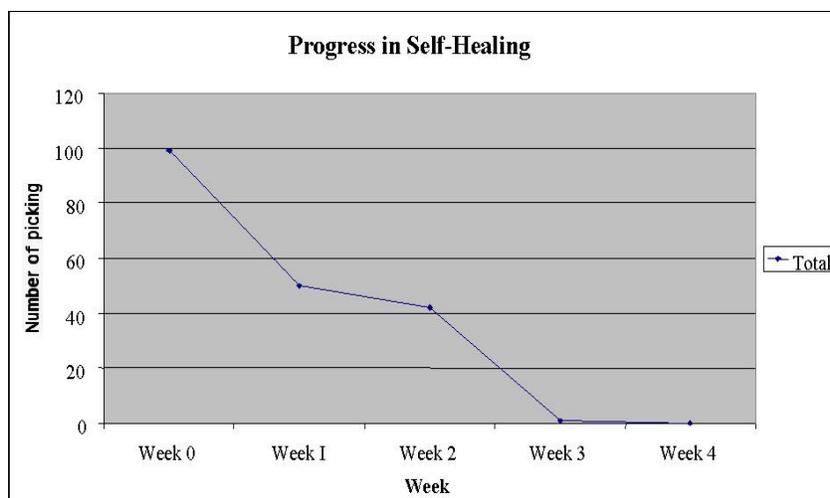


Figure 5. Self-monitoring of picking at skin

### Conclusion

This integrated project was successful in reducing eczema; a 6-month follow-up showed no recurrence. This specific case example suggests that apparent intractable disorders may be ameliorated when the individual actively participates in a self-healing approach. There are many other projects based on this systematic program utilizing imagery that equally confirm the efficacy of this approach.

We recommend that therapists and teachers explore utilizing a structured program<sup>1</sup> as a complementary and concurrent self-healing strategy with their existing work. By teaching these cascading holistic stress management skills, clients and participants can actively practice at home and in daily routines—and facilitate physiological regeneration and emotional and cognitive balance.

### References

- Peper, E., Gibney, K.H. & Holt, C. (2002). *Make Health Happen: Training Yourself to Create Wellness*. Kendall-Hunt, Dubuque, IA.  
 Sapolsky, R. (1998). *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers*. San Francisco: W H Freeman & Co.

Communication should be addressed to:

Erik Peper, Ph.D  
 Institute for Holistic Healing Studies  
 San Francisco State University  
 1600 Holloway Avenue  
 San Francisco, CA 94132

Keywords:  
 Stress management  
 Imagery  
 Eczema

<sup>1</sup> A structured program is found in Peper, E., Gibney, K.H. & Holt, C. (2002) *Make Health Happen: Training Yourself to Create Wellness*. Dubuque: Kendall-Hunt.