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“HeartMath and Golf”
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Next time you're on the green about to putt, put your heart into the shot. Literally.

Improving your golf game is the latest application of HeartMath, a stress reduction technique that enhances reflex speed, focus, emotional control and clear thinking by tapping into the heart's intelligence. The benefits of HeartMath, however, extend beyond the golf course.

Used for cardiac rehab patients, corporate managers, kids with test fears and more, the technique teaches people to rewrite the hard drive of their neural pathways. The result is a physiological change: when the HeartMath technique known as Freeze Frame is invoked, heart rate is lowered, blood pressure drops, stress hormones decrease. At the same time, brain function *increases*, allowing for greater awareness while staying relaxed and calm. And that's a good state to be in whether recovering from a heart attack or working on your golf game.

“When you play golf, you can get emotional because you're playing poorly...or because you're doing well. So emotional management on the golf course is a significant consideration,” stated Tom Ryan, integrative medicine program manager for Columbia-St.Mary's. He's also a licensed HeartMath trainer and avid golfer who took eight strokes off his game within a week of learning the technique. “HeartMath is about emotional management,” he said.

Skip Simonds, head golf professional at Milwaukee Country Club, noted that in other sports, such as tennis, the physical movement is a natural tension reliever. “In golf, you need to calm yourself,” he pointed out. “Tension is destructive to a fluid swing.”

Leading With Your Heart

HeartMath is based on recent findings in neurophysiology. In the past, it was accepted that the brain was the dominant organ and that it ruled the heart and body in a top-down dictatorship. Research at the HeartMath Institute in Boulder Creek, Calif., however, indicated that the brain and heart are actually in a two-way dialogue.

More significant, though, was the revelation that the heart emits a signal that is 50 times more powerful than the brain and can be measured eight or 10 feet away with an electrocardiograph (EKG) machine.

“The paradigm we all learned, whether you went to medical school or not, is that the brain is the most powerful thing and controls everything,” said Bruce Wilson, M.D., cardiologist, chairman of the board of the Heart Hospital of Milwaukee and a licensed HeartMath trainer who brought HeartMath to Milwaukee in the 1990’s. “But now you have to stop and ask yourself, ‘What’s going on here? Why would the brain be in charge if the heart signal is much more powerful?’ We have to maybe rethink that.”

Swing to the Beat

To rethink the paradigm, it’s helpful to understand a law of physics called entrainment.

“The basic idea is that everything in the universe swings together, dances together, resonates together because it saves energy to dance with a strong beat that’s already happening rather than making up your own,” stated Jeffrey Thompson, D.C., B.F.A., founder and director of the Center for Neuroacoustic Research in Encinitas, Calif.

This includes humans. Thompson explained that, for efficiency purposes, human bodies tune—or entrain—to the most dominant pulse to which they’re exposed. Individual organs do the same thing.

That’s the basis on which HeartMath rests—you need to tap into your heart, rather than your head, to master stress because your heart sets the tone with its dominant pulse.

The Stress Response

Whether you’re being chased by a saber tooth tiger, cramming for a work deadline, or trying to make a six foot putt, your body doesn’t discriminate. It simply registers, “Stress!” and kicks into the fight or flight response. Adrenaline pours into the system and blood pressure and heart rate go up. A cascade of stress hormones, including cortisol, floods your body.

If you were to measure your Heart Rate Variability (HRV) signal at this time, it would look like erratic, jagged peaks and valleys. “During this incoherent or chaotic signal—which is going from our heart up to our brain—it shuts off the function of the cortex, [which is] the smart part” of our brain, Wilson explained. So we do stupid things, like choke on an easy putt or say something nasty to our boss.

Conversely, when your HRV signal looks like a smooth sine wave, it has coherence in it. In other words, you’re at peak performance.

HeartMath proponents say you can flip the switch in a heart beat.

If your goal is to loosen up your golf swing for instance, try following the Quick Coherence steps:

- Pause
- Slow your breath to five counts in and out each, imagining that you’re breathing from your heart center

- Call up a detailed memory of a time when you felt intense appreciation or gratitude
- Swing!

The first three steps stop the stress cascade and help you think more clearly. If you need to problem solve, you're now in the ideal physiological position to access a wider field of information and can take the next steps which complete the Freeze Frame technique:

- Ask yourself what would be a better way to handle the situation
- Listen for the response
- Act on the information

Like any good habit, rebuilding your neural architecture takes practice. But Wilson promises results if you do.

Scientific Frontiers

Understanding the link between emotions and health is one of the hottest areas of scientific research. Emotions are “dismissed. They’re seen as a sign of weakness—especially in men, but also in women,” said Ned Kalin, M.D., director of the HealthEmotions Research Institute at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

“The belief has been if you just work hard, use your brain and plan out a logical path, you’ll be fine. The fact of the matter, I believe, is that emotions are the fabric of a human’s life. They are as important, or more important, than thinking. And they’re as important as the heartbeat. Only now are we beginning to understand that and are people beginning to buy into that.”

So tee up, breathe deep, appreciate that you live in this enlightened time...and swing!

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