



Essential Tremor (ET)

Mindfulness & ET

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What is the next step when medical or surgical therapy does not control all of the symptoms of essential tremor? You may be surprised to hear that you have the answer to this common question within you. Understanding how your thoughts, ideas and experiences affect your tremor is the next step toward coping better with ET.

ET symptoms come and go, often without warning, and the mind is on constant alert to monitor for these changes. This internal alarm system brings us to heightened awareness with enhanced focus on tremor as our mind constantly monitors for a negative change. If not reset, this internal alarm system sets up an ever stronger daily reminder that you have a problem and things are just “not right.”

As a result, the experience of tremor becomes coupled to negative feelings and sets the stage for distress, worry, anxieties and fear - about how you feel now and how your tremor may change in the future. These feelings and your tremor symptom become a daily focus as the mind becomes preoccupied with negativity and fear. Left unchecked, negative thoughts can impact the rest of the day and/or interactions with other people.

Preoccupation with the negative impact of symptoms can disrupt the ability to live in the moment. The mind translates sensations from the body and can affect these very sensations. Similarly, the mind can translate the power of healing over the body.

What these observations tell us is that the power to heal can come from many places. Medication and surgery can treat symptoms and restore many of the body's functions that can be lost from disease. However, modern science and medicine may not be enough and does not treat the experience of the person in the moment of tremor. The power to heal, to be and feel whole, to know that you are OK, comes from you.

Mind Power

Our mind can be our strongest asset or biggest obstacle when it comes to feeling better. Taking steps to change our habits for healthier living toward a focus on healing requires a commitment from the mind. Your mind will influence how you feel with tremor.

Think about a time when stress was a major part of your life. Did your tremor get worse? Or perhaps tremor started during that time of stress? Stress can amplify tremor symptoms. Over time, repeated or runaway stress can change how we think and react and can negatively impact our health.

This effect can also work in the opposite way. You might think of your favorite place, relaxing on vacation or other time when stress was at a minimum.

How did your tremor respond? Was it less intense? Less bothersome?

Chronic stress negatively affects our body and mind. Conversely, low stress and enjoyable experiences positively affects our body and mind. Fortunately, we can modify how our mind and brain react to stress and reduce the impact on disease. A well-known and measurable example of this is the placebo effect.

Innovative research shows that expectations we bring to a treatment will in part determine the strength of the placebo effect.

Hope, belief, and positive expectations that a treatment will work will increase the chances it will do so.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness therapy can reduce the negative impact of stress and sharpen the mind's potential for personal healing. It is a way to stay in the present moment, engaging in life and living life as fully as you can. Mindfulness is often defined as being present, in the moment, with intention in a non-judgmental way. Being mindful allows the mind to see things for what they are and then to let the thoughts go, instead of letting our thoughts control our body, mind and brain function. So how can this help you?

Being present in the moment helps one become aware of the many thoughts, ideas, distractions and assumptions that drive our behavior and impact our wellbeing on a daily basis. Our mind can become distracted by making assumptions, jumping to conclusions, and forming judgments that can have a negative impact on our thoughts. Becoming aware of

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these roaming or ruminating thoughts is the first step to living in the moment. Observing your thoughts without judgment helps you become more aware of your body, sensations, emotions and surroundings.

This technique is particularly powerful for people living with tremor. For example, when tremor increases you now have one of two choices - to react or respond. These choices at first glance may seem very similar but they are indeed very different in mindset and outcome.

React. By reacting to tremor you are giving control to the spontaneous thoughts and feelings that affect your behavior and how you feel. Your spontaneous thoughts are unique to you but often include judgments such as

- "Tremor is running my life."
- "My disease is worse."
- "I must fix this or stop this now."
- "If only I didn't have tremor everything would be fine."
- "What if someone sees my tremor."

These reactions can lead to a 'snow ball effect' and further worsen stress leading to yet worsening tremor.

Respond. By responding to tremor you are no longer reacting but instead observing and choosing how to respond. How you respond is up to you.

- "This problem will pass."
- "I will sit for a few minutes to let this pass."
- "I have experienced tremor before..."
- "My tremor is in my hands but is not me."

By choosing your response you gain a sense of control and change the relationship you have to your disease or symptom.

This does not mean that you have given into your symptoms or enjoy the fact that you have tremor (or any other medical condition or problem in your life) but it does reduce the downward spiral that can happen when life gives you problems or obstacles. Tremor is a good example of this downward spiral or 'snowball effect.'

Practicing Mindfulness

Mindfulness can be an informal spontaneous practice or a formal and structured approach. A spontaneous and informal practice is present many times, perhaps endless number of times throughout the day. These daily experiences and moments are used as an opportunity to take notice and be present. The next time you awaken to a sunrise, hear the laughter of a child or are stuck in traffic you can practice mindfulness. Simply bringing awareness to the moment, identifying any feelings the experience brings on and how this influences us.

Road rage is a good example of how our behavior can be driven by emotions and thoughts without our full awareness. This reaction will cause us stress, increase aggressive driving and affect our mood, behavior and perhaps tremor for the entire day.

Mindfulness is also practiced as a formal exercise with meditation. One way to practice mindfulness meditation is to sit quietly and calmly but with attention and awareness. Bringing your attention to your breathing is one way to focus your attention. During this time you will simply observe your thoughts, feelings sensations and perceptions and let them pass without judging them, labeling them or controlling them. Meditation is a practice and as such the benefits will improve with time and practice. Over time, you will learn to apply these skills to everyday events.

When something happens that requires your attention you now have the insight to respond and not simply react. Described in another way, tremor no longer drives your reactions as you can intentionally decide how to respond to it. This element of control and intention can liberate you from the hold of tremor on your emotions.

Mindfulness is not without risk that can come from paying attention to and increasing your awareness of thoughts and behavior. Individuals with psychotic disorders, significant depression or post-traumatic stress disorder should meditate under the care of a mental health professional. Mindfulness can be helpful tool to enhance the effect of medicine and surgery on tremor control.

Next time tremor feels 'out of control' take a moment to reflect and know that you have control in how you respond.

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Our Mission:

The IETF funds research to find the cause of essential tremor (ET) that leads to treatments and a cure, increases awareness, and provides educational materials, tools, and support for healthcare providers, the public, and those affected by ET.