

To Your Health!

By Judy Hargis, P.A., and Audeen Wagner



Biofeedback

Have you ever wished that you could just “will” your symptoms away? That you could invoke some mental process to make you feel better? Read on! With biofeedback you might be able to do just that by harnessing the power of your mind to help improve your health.

First, some definitions:

Biofeedback. The technique of making unconscious or involuntary bodily processes (such as heartbeats or brain waves) perceptible to the senses in order to manipulate them by conscious mental control (Merriam-Webster).

A medical definition says it's the process of furnishing information to an individual, usually in an auditory or visual mode, on the state of one or more physiological variables such as heart rate, blood pressure, or skin temperature; such a procedure enables the individual to gain some voluntary control over the variable being sampled.

And, the Biofeedback Certification Institute of America provides this statement:

“Biofeedback is a process that enables an individual to learn how to change physiological activity for the purposes of improving health and performance. Precise instruments measure physiological activity such as brainwaves, heart function, breathing, muscle activity, and skin temperature. These instruments rapidly and accurately ‘feed back’ information to the user. The presentation of this information – often in conjunction with changes in thinking, emotions, and behavior – supports desired physiological changes. Over time, these changes can endure without continued use of an instrument.”

So, what does all that mean really? With biofeedback you can use your thoughts and will to control your body. It's a unique way of applying “mind over matter.” This idea, based on scientific studies, shows that we all have the potential to influence with our minds many of the functions of our bodies.

Chances are you have already used some biofeedback in your daily life. If you have ever taken your temperature and found you are running a fever, your brain functions in response to the fever and you take steps based on this “feedback” to lower the temperature – you might get some bed rest and drink lots of fluids. Or, have you stepped on a scale and noted an increase in weight that you don't like? Armed with this information, you might decide to change your diet, add some meaningful exercise and lose some weight. These mental responses to physical information describe how your mind and body work together, based on biofeedback.

Biofeedback has become a more common practice since the 1970s, when a psychologist from Yale University named Neal Miller discovered the basic principle of biofeedback. His studies revealed that the mind can respond to “feedback” from the body,

and that measurable activity within the human body would respond to voluntary control – the ultimate mind-body therapy. Miller and many other researchers have made biofeedback a viable tool for patients to improve their health and well being. Elements of yoga, relaxation techniques and meditation were an important part of experimentation, and are used often in actual practice today. Dr. Barbara Brown, a research psychologist, is credited as first to coin the term “biofeedback.”

OK, how does this work? To help you learn this technique, a biofeedback specialist uses signals from special monitoring equipment to teach you to control certain body functions, such as blood pressure, muscle tension, skin temperature, even heart rate. You may see a visual graph on a machine called an electromyography (EMG), attached to your body with electrodes (similar to an EKG). The EMG measures muscle activity, then, through specific exercises, relaxation techniques, breathing and imagery, you can actually see on the computer screen a change in the way your muscles are behaving. The patient learns to make changes that are perhaps barely visible at first but, with practice, the responses are strengthened, so as to bring relief and improvement to many disorders. (Other machines are also used, but the EMG is the commonly used in biofeedback treatment.)

Biofeedback is useful in treating stress-related conditions and many other problems. Ongoing research is identifying a wide array of diseases and conditions where it is helpful, such as asthma, headaches, hot flashes, irritable bowel syndrome, irregular heartbeats, chronic constipation, low back pain, high blood pressure, incontinence, and more. This amazing system stresses relaxation techniques, and can successfully treat illnesses which tend to worsen under stress (such as asthma and ulcers).

Biofeedback is a non-invasive form of treatment. There are no drugs involved, and the sensors used do not penetrate the skin surface. There is absolutely no pain or discomfort involved. Through biofeedback a person experiencing migraines can learn to ward off headaches; a patient who has had a stroke may gain muscle use again; children and adults diagnosed with attention deficit disorders can greatly improve concentration and control issues; those with incontinence or digestive woes can achieve bladder and bowel control. And much more. Definitely worth the effort! See your health provider for information on how to get started.

Our thanks to Beth Gore, an accomplished physical therapist with special training and knowledge in this area. Beth helps patients daily to learn this exciting technique. We appreciate her expertise and help with this article.

There is much more information available online, especially on the website for the Biofeedback Certification Institute of America. As always, you may contact us at To Your Health! c/o The Independent, 725 Bridge St. Vernonia, OR 97064; or email us at health@the-independent.net.

Want to be a volunteer investigator?

Volunteer advocates and investigators are needed to serve as ombudsmen for residents of nursing homes, residential care facilities, assisted living facilities and adult foster care homes. The office of the Long Term Care Ombudsman will train the volunteers on the ag-

ing process, communication skills, problem-solving skills, investigation and other ombudsman skills. The certification training will begin on Friday, September 12, in Portland.

As Certified Ombudsmen, the volunteers work to improve the quality of residents' lives by identifying and investigating complaints and concerns on behalf of the residents, then working with the facilities to make changes. Typical concerns cover a broad range and often include resident care, residents' rights, such as privacy,

respect and dignity; and quality of life concerns such as appropriate activities and meals. “The volunteers make a tremendous difference in the lives of the residents,” says Kathy Walter, Program Administrator. “They are well prepared and effective.”

On September 28, a training for volunteers interested in serving as friendly visitors will be offered.

For information about the program or to learn how to get involved, contact Kathy Walter at 1-800-522-2602.

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