

The Art of Struggle Reduction

Peace Exists in the Absence of Struggle

Tom Diffenderfer

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to those who are seeking to discover a more peaceful way to live. Also, to my wife Stella and four children, Justin, Amara, Brianna, and Savannah, who continue to inspire.

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REDUCE THE STRUGGLE

It is possible to move through life with minimal struggle. Your outward action in harmony with the inner voice that guides you, doing the right thing for the right reason, with a feeling of the wind at your back, effortless. Think for a moment about how you would answer the next two questions. What would it feel like to spend most of the time, most days, living in peace? And what is preventing it?

The Art of Struggle Reduction provides a foundation for viewing life through a different lens. The concepts are easy to understand but can be challenging to implement. The reason is that the human mind is complicated, and The Art of Struggle Reduction is simple, very simple. One school of thought is that if you are not busy doing something and staying on top of things, you will lose your edge and your effectiveness. This attitude can create an over-active mind, prone to excessive worry and stress. The Art of Struggle Reduction takes a different approach. Moving through life with minimal worry, stress, and struggle makes one more effective, not less. Imagine

walking straight through an empty room to the other side instead of winding your way through piles of clutter. The heart of Struggle Reduction is less clutter. A mind that is settled and clear is at peace. Understanding replaces knowledge.

This book is for doctors, nurses, social workers, mental health counselors, and anyone looking to live a more calm and peaceful life. The methods we will discuss have been shown to be effective in helping to manage anger and stress and helping to prevent relapse for those with substance use disorders and other mental health issues.

The Art of Struggle Reduction's origin, dates back to 1980, the year I first read the book *"Think on These Things"* by J. Krishnamurti. There are profound discussions of peace and struggle throughout the book, which helped shape my future views and guided me to the practice of meditation. Now, fast forward to 1994. While working as an Addictions counselor at a treatment center in Nashville, I continually noticed the negative impact that feelings of anxiety and stress were having on our recovering clients. Those that did not learn how to manage and cope with anxiety and stress often relapsed,

returning to the maladaptive pattern of self-medicating those uncomfortable feelings. There is a clear link among anxiety, stress, and relapse that is even more prevalent today than it was in 1994.

The Art of Struggle Reduction evolved from a blend of styles that included cognitive behavior therapy, 12 step recovery concepts, and my long-held views on peace, struggle, and mindfulness. Within several years we had formed the company Relaxation for Anxiety and began mixing sounds of nature, guided relaxations and original music in our studio. From then until now, we've been teaching guided relaxation and meditation, teaching anger and stress management, providing counseling for those with substance use and co-occurring disorders, and producing relaxation CDs and downloads. It is the culmination of these efforts that has brought The Art of Struggle Reduction to life.

The Art of Struggle Reduction teaches the listener to observe his or her thoughts, identify areas of internal struggle, and utilize a few simple strategies—to allow the struggle to be reduced. The benefits are many: reduced anxiety, reduced frequency and intensity of panic

attacks, less difficulty falling asleep at night, and a calmer lifestyle when awake. For the discussion of recovery from addiction, Struggle Reduction can be used to manage stress and anger which helps to prevent relapse. Regularly reaching a deep state of calm can help with overall health problems, such as lowering high blood pressure, and reducing the risk of stroke. These changes can potentially add years to your life. The bottom line is living a more calm, peaceful, relaxed life is good for your health.

SPECIFIC METHODS AND STRATEGIES OF STRUGGLE REDUCTION

THE WATER GLOBE

Visualize a water globe or snow globe. Imagine that each piece of glitter or snow floating in the water represents one of your thoughts. When you shake up the globe trying to make something happen, the glitter or snow moves about rapidly in a chaotic manor; however if you sit the water globe down and just let it be, just observe it without intent, it becomes calm and still. Peace is a natural state, and when the mind is settled, peace exists. So, what causes the mind to become unsettled? Many forms of negative thinking and self-talk, irrational thoughts, worry, fear, obsessive guilt and shame, envy and jealousy—simply put, it is our own internal struggle that kidnaps our minds from the awareness of peace. So, the question is not how does one find peace, but instead how does one reduce struggle. Come to understand why we struggle, and the struggle will cease.

Every moment of this day we have the choice to keep our hearts and souls open and aware of the peace that exists in the here and now, or to allow our minds to ignore this truth and get lost in the powerful negative energy that fuels anxiety and struggle. How you choose

to spend your emotional energy from now until you go to sleep tonight will go far in determining the amount of peace in your life.

DTM SCALE (Do the Math)

By observing your thoughts, you can identify areas of internal struggle. Then, utilizing a few simple methods and strategies, you can learn to reduce or release that struggle. Struggle exists both in the way we perceive external events and how those perceptions affect our internal dialog. Peace exists in the absence of struggle. Remember, the question is not how to find peace, but instead how to reduce struggle.

In a twenty-four hour period most of us spend five to eight hours sleeping. Of the remaining time, basically your time awake, how much is spent living in peace? And how much is spent living in struggle? Out of 100 percent of your time (16 to 19 hours per day), place a number that represents the average percent of time spent in struggle and another number representing the time spent at peace. Make sure both numbers add up to 100. You can use the following diagram for guidance. I've listed some examples; however, personalize it by adding your own in the spaces provided.

Struggle _____% worry, negative self-talk, fear, anger, guilt and shame, road rage, phobic, controlling, anxious, people-pleasing, overly critical, arguments with spouse or partner, problems with coworker

Peace _____% relaxed, calm, happy, serene, enjoying life, worry-free, grateful, understanding, realistic self-talk, humility, loving, secure, accepting

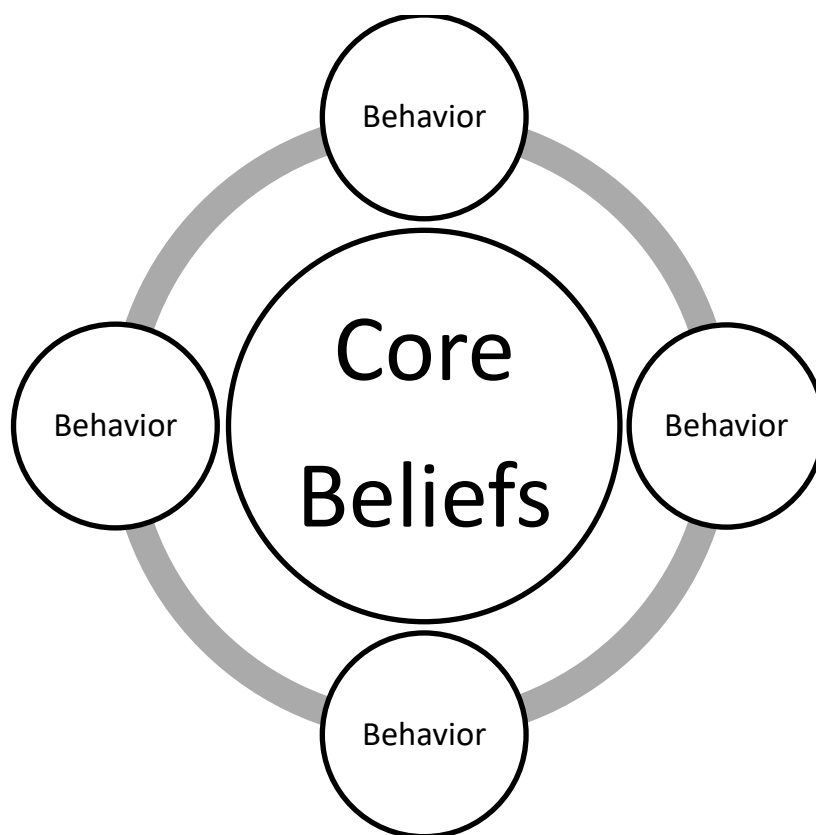
The majority of people who do the math realize that 50 to 90 percent of their day is spent in some form of struggle. By increasing awareness and making some changes in thinking, these percentages can be adjusted. Try pausing several times a day to do the math. If you observe any struggle thinking, then it's time to make some decisions. The Art of Struggle Reduction offers 3 options. One, accept the situation exactly as it is then release the struggle. Two, take immediate action on a specific issue then release the struggle. And three, schedule a time later to resolve the situation and then release the struggle. Whether you decide to accept, act or delay, you can always choose to release the struggle and shift awareness to peace that exists in the present moment. With practice, a feeling of gaining more control over your life develops and you will begin taking joy in letting go of present moment struggle.

THE INTEGRITY FLOWER

The Integrity Flower exercise teaches us that when our outward behavior and actions don't match with the inner voice that guides us, there is struggle, and where there is struggle there is no peace. If you have a piece of paper and a pencil you could draw this out; otherwise, use your imagination. Imagine a flower with a large round center, completely surrounded by small round petals. The large center circle of the flower represents the deepest part of us, our center and core of our being. Some would call it our soul, spirit, or heart. It is the inner voice that guides us. This is the place where we intuitively know right from wrong. The small round circles or petals represent our outward behavior and actions, the act of doing. Now take a self-inventory. How many of your actions are completely consistent with your innermost beliefs? By examining, and being brutally honest with yourself, you can continue to make adjustments. As your outside actions become more in harmony with your inside beliefs, struggle falls away, and peace remains.

The goal here is to reduce struggle. In the world today, so many people live their lives in struggle with high levels of stress and anxiety. Some of the external challenges can seem very difficult. However, it is your perception of

these events that will determine the amount of internal struggle you experience. With practice, it becomes easier to keep your awareness focused on the now and the peace that exists there.



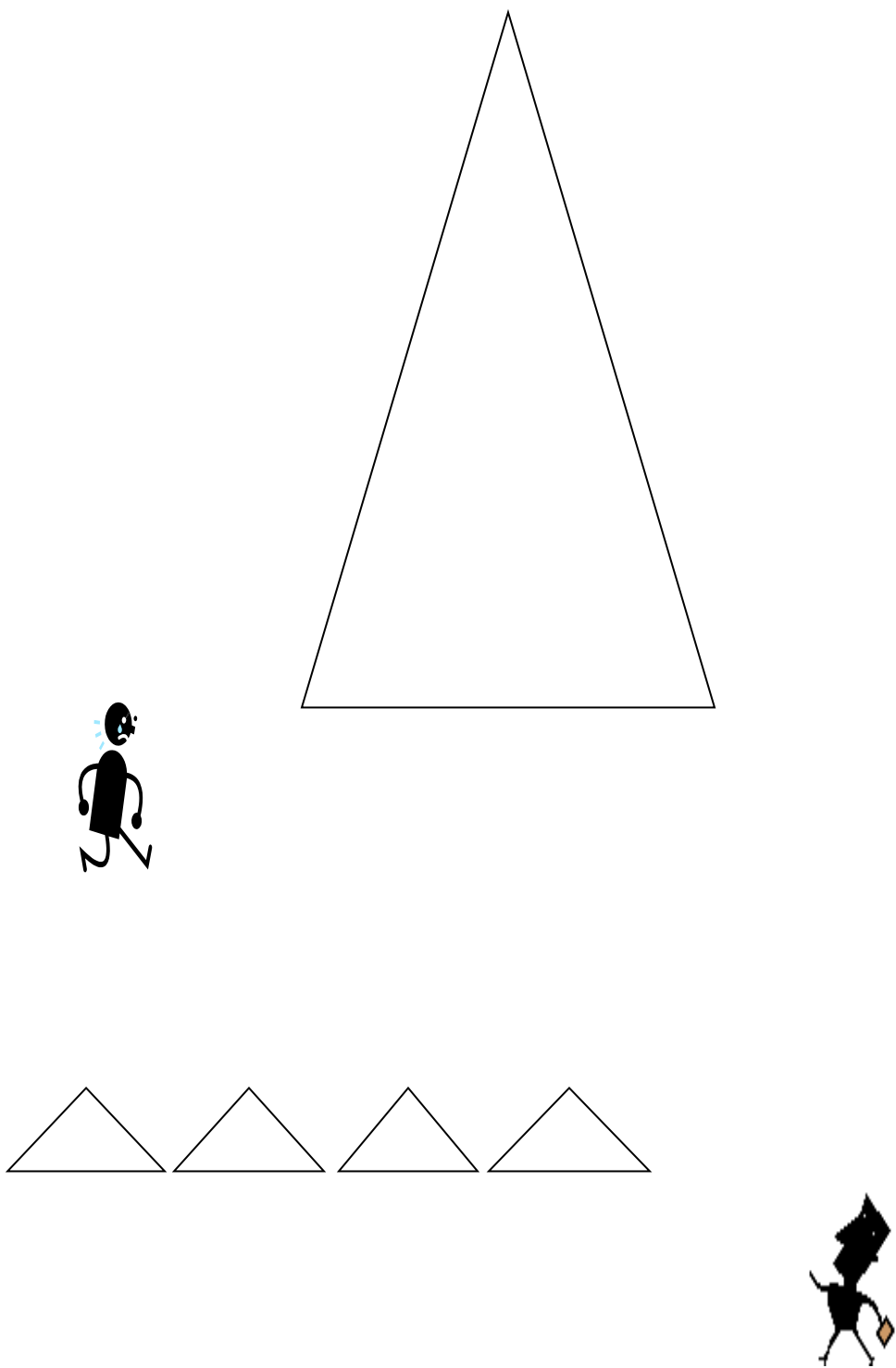
THE INTEGRITY FLOWER

Make a list of specific behaviors you would like to change to make them more consistent with your core beliefs.

MAKE HILLS OUT OF THE MOUNTAIN

Not being able to identify the various challenges in our lives can make it difficult to find solutions. By the time most people seek counseling for addiction and other mental health issues their ability to see the problems clearly has become clouded. It can begin to feel like everything has piled up and become one huge problem that is too big to handle. One huge mountain too large to climb. This robs us of motivation to work on solutions and keeps us stuck. We may even give up trying altogether. It can feel hopeless.

What is the answer? Start by making hills out of the mountain, they are much easier to travel. Each hill can be named and observed separately, for example: finances, relationship, employment etc. Deal with one hill or problem at a time rather than trying to tackle everything at once. Remember, whether you decide to accept, act, or delay, always choose to release the struggle and shift awareness to present moment peace.



Now answer these 2 questions:

If you are experiencing this problem, can you express how it makes you feel?

Can you identify and list areas in your life that are causing you struggle today?

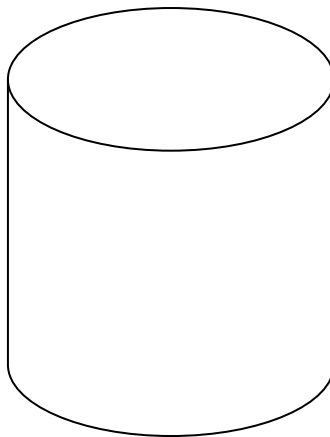
EMPTY THE TANK

Imagine that there are two separate tanks in your brain. One is used for processing events, and the other is used for storage. Everyday many different events occur in our lives. It is how we perceive and process these events and manage the feelings that will determine our level of struggle. For example; an event occurs. It is perceived and processed in the processing tank. Feelings are felt and managed, and then another event occurs, etc. If there is a problem with processing the event or managing the feelings, the unresolved content is moved to the storage tank where it could stay for hours, months, or even years. If the storage tank becomes full, the emotional content stored there begins to leak into the processing tank, disrupting the functioning there. It then becomes increasingly difficult to manage feelings, resulting in struggles with anxiety, fear, depression, anger and more. The solution is a dual process. Step one is to repair the processing tank by adjusting the way we perceive and process life's daily events. This will have a direct and positive impact on the feelings that are

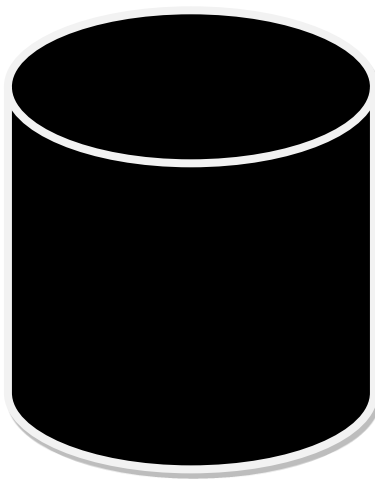
created, making them easier to manage. Increasing our struggle reduction methods will help keep the processing tank clean, clear, and functioning smoothly.

Step two is to observe specific content in the storage tank and then release the struggle. This will free up space. If we have done a good job with the first step, we won't be adding very much new content to the storage tank. And peace exists in the absence of struggle.

Processing tank



Storage tank



What irrational or impaired thinking do you use on a daily basis that causes struggle?

What kind of thinking could you implement that would increase feelings of peace?

Can you identify anything in your storage tank that needs to be removed?

Identify and discuss specific strategies you can use to remove content from your storage tank.

Identify and list specific struggle reduction strategies to use in the here and now.

SOME THOUGHTS ON RELATIONSHIPS

Person A and person B are two separate and distinct individuals. Each has his or her own level of self-esteem, confidence, values, and ethics. They both have certain intuitive abilities to manage his or her emotions and behaviors with social supports for help. They each have their own interests, hobbies, hopes, and dreams. And both are on the path, as we all are, to receive the knowledge, insight, and understanding that life's journey will bring.

If person A and person B meet along the way, they may choose to walk the path together. They are two people on separate journeys walking the same path. They walk together because they have chosen to do so. They may come to care deeply for one another and form a rock-solid commitment to remain together on the path forever. Still they remain two people on separate journeys walking the same path.

In order for two separate and distinct individuals to walk the path together, they must learn the art of

compromise. Debating ideas and beliefs is best done with empathy and compassion. Sadly, many strong feelings and emotions can cloud the view. It is important not to lose sight of the reason for compromise, and that is the choice to walk the path together. Compromise requires communication rooted in caring and respect for one another.

Many couples lose sight of caring compromise and become lost along the way. This is what lost looks like: saying or doing cruel things to each other, losing identity and becoming overly needy and dependent on each other. Lost looks like subjecting one another to physical or emotional pain, trying to control or force, and losing the ability to manage emotions and behaviors.

Love understands this. Love allows person A and person B to remain two separate and distinct individuals who have made the choice to travel the path together. Love shines a light so they can find the path if they get lost along the way. Love allows for each to want the other to experience his or her hopes and dreams to the fullest. Love provides strength and guidance to help them remain supportive of one another's journey, as

they walk the path together.

Now answer these 3 questions:

Can you identify any struggles in your relationships?

What specific changes could you make to improve the relationship?

What specific changes would you like to see your partner make?

MEDITATION

I would like to present a very simple view on the topic of meditation. Less is more. When listening to music it is not necessarily the notes that create the rhythm or feel of the song, it is the space between the notes. Assume a comfortable sitting position, close your eyes, take a few deep breaths, smile, and relax. Soon you may begin to notice the thoughts racing around in your mind. Trying to slow your thoughts down or clear your mind of them all together just creates struggle. Where there is struggle there is no peace. Instead, just relax and observe without intent. Visualize that you are watching a movie and your thoughts are the movie's scenes flashing across the big screen. If you can relax and observe without struggle, allowing the thoughts to come and go peacefully, the thoughts will begin to slow down on their own with no effort on your part. In fact, effort on your part will just stir them up. As the thoughts begin to slow, your awareness of peace begins to increase. This can take up to 15 or 20 minutes, but the centering down time decreases with practice. It may take several attempts to

develop a comfort level with this process as most people are not used to sitting still without activity. But that is what this meditation consists of. As you continue to sit with eyes closed and a relaxed attitude, the increased awareness of peace just happens. When one comes to understand this on a deeper level, anxiety and worry is reduced. After all what is there to worry about, all you are doing is sitting and observing. Everything occurs naturally, without effort. Why not try going to the “movies” tonight?

RELAXATION

One of the most effective ways to manage anxiety and stress is to learn how to relax. Not just relaxing as in “kicking back” and reading a good book but learning how to reach a deep state of relaxation. Some of the methods for achieving this are guided visualization, meditation, and progressive muscle relaxation.

Progressive muscle relaxation, or PMR, was discovered and introduced by Dr. Edmund Jacobson. This technique involves tensing and relaxing various major muscle groups throughout the body in what some refer to as “bringing the body down.” Guided visualization and meditation can help ease the mind into harmony with the relaxed body. A good way to look at it is, “bring the body down and the mind will follow.”

The term “guided relaxation” refers to a recorded voice-over that actually explains to and guides the listener. As with any guided relaxation, the listener is encouraged to assume a comfortable position and close their eyes. It is important to remember not to try to force a state of calm or clearing of the mind, as that only

creates struggle. Instead, just relax, smile, and allow the relaxation to unfold. The body and mind will naturally settle and become still. Remember to take slow, deep breaths during the practice. When the session is over, the participant usually experiences a relaxed feeling, both physically and emotionally. The mind and body become accustomed to deep relaxation, and with regular practice, moving easily into a deep state of calm.

You can find more information and actually listen to and practice guided relaxation on the www.recoveryconsult.com website. I recommend practicing relaxation twice a day, for four to six weeks. The practice may then be adjusted to once or twice daily as needed. If your anxiety level increases, try increasing the number of sessions. Also, on nights when you have difficulty falling asleep, practicing deep relaxation will often put you right to sleep. In my experience, this practice of guided relaxation has been especially helpful to those with addiction problems and certain types of anxiety disorders.

FROM NOW UNTIL YOU GO TO SLEEP

Prior to a musical performance, the band will often do a dress rehearsal or sound check. They perform a part of the regular show, making sure everything is in tune and functioning. The musicians and crew adjust volumes, aim lighting, and basically prepare for the show that will take place later. Many people spend their time on earth in a dress rehearsal, preparing to live their life. It sounds like this: “One of these days, I’m going to...” or, “Someday I will get around to that...” Blame is often assigned to someone or something: “If I could just get out of this relationship...” or, “When I finally get a better job...” The Art of Struggle Reduction teaches us to live in the present moment and take responsibility for our choices. A phrase often used in Struggle Reduction is “from now until I go to sleep tonight.”

Each moment, you can decide to release the struggle and be aware of peace. It’s your decision what type of morals you will live by and if your actions will be in harmony with the inner voice that guides you. You will choose how much time you spend worrying about what

other people think of you. From now until you go to sleep tonight, live the life you want, in peace, and with meaning and purpose. It is your choice, and this is not a dress rehearsal.

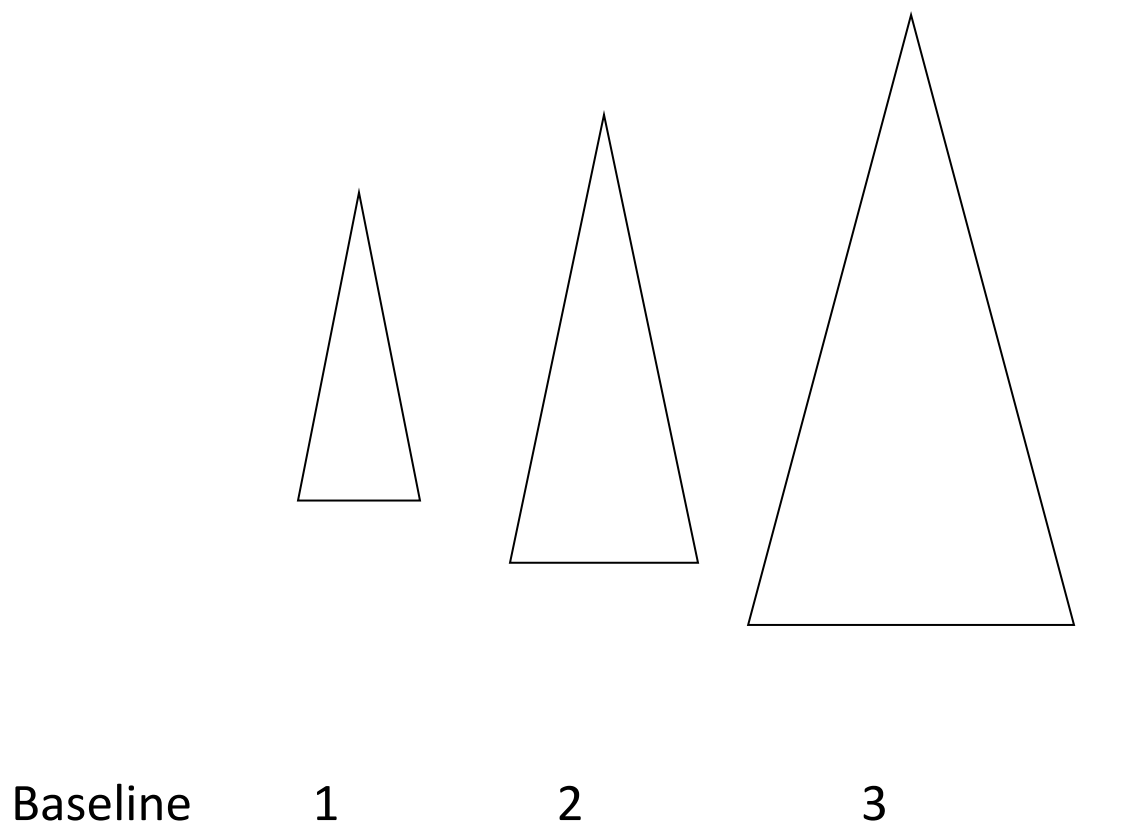
From now until I go to sleep tonight, this is how I choose to live my life

RE-ESTABLISH YOUR BASELINE

For the purpose of this book, the term baseline refers to the place where one feels the most emotionally stable and well. Think of one of those days when you are moving through life with the wind at your back and a clear view of the peace that exists in the here and now. The numbers 1, 2, and 3 represent three different individuals with varying levels of anxiety. Person 1 in our example experiences a mild amount of anxiety based on his or her perceptions of life's events. This anxiety moves them a short distance from their baseline. However, person number one has the coping skills to manage and return to his or her baseline. Person 2, on the other hand, finds life's events much more difficult to manage. Moderate anxiety has moved him or her much further from their baseline causing considerable discomfort. It is with much struggle that this person is able to find and return to his or her baseline. Finally, person number three has minimal ability to cope at this time and struggles to even remember what the baseline feels like. High anxiety has moved this person to a very scary place,

and he or she cannot find the way back.

1. Mild anxiety, uneasy feelings
2. Moderate anxiety, very uncomfortable
3. High anxiety, panic, extreme fear



When anxiety reaches high levels, the goal is to reduce it enough to re-establish some comfort with the baseline. Re-discovering your baseline after having been out on an emotional limb is like a drop of water in the desert. The

increased awareness of peace, along with the relaxation and meditation techniques featured in this book, will help many re-establish their baseline. You may need to seek the help of a licensed mental health counselor or psychiatrist if the anxiety persists at a high level. As you learn how to incorporate the principles of Struggle Reduction into your life, the Baseline chart and the DTM scale in chapter 3 can be used as helpful guides.

ONENESS

I remember as a child laying in the yard, on my back, feeling and smelling the earth and grass. Gazing up at the sky, I would watch the beautiful white clouds slowly morph from one shape to the next. First, I could see a dinosaur, then a tree, and then a car. With no beginning or ending, the slow continual movement of the clouds created a playground right in front of my eyes. I remember a feeling of oneness with the earth and sky, as time seemed to stand still. Totally present in the moment, there was no regretting the past, or worry for the future. There was not even a conscious awareness of self. Everything was connected. The warm summer breeze was the artist, creating an ever-changing display of fascinating objects. There was peace and happiness. Not a care in the world.

I still experience those moments as an adult, maybe on a lovely summer day, playing in the yard with my children or walking on the sandy beach, listening to the hypnotic sound of the ocean waves. Often during silent meditation or deep relaxation, life just opens up, and

that feeling of oneness occurs, accompanied by total joy and peace. There is a very natural feel to it. It just is. And I wonder if everything else is some type of struggle, in one form or another.

SCRIPTS THAT PROMOTE DEEP RELAXATION

GUIDED RELAXATION

With the help of guided visualization, we will be taking a vacation to the beach. The purpose of this vacation is to move towards a deep state of calm. Begin by taking a slow, deep breath to the bottom of your lungs. As you exhale, visualize yourself looking through the palm trees, out over the white sandy beach, to the beautiful, turquoise water. Observe the waves as they gently caress the shore. As you lie down, you feel the support of the warm sand on your back, and your body begins to relax. Now, imagine the muscles in your feet beginning to go limp and visualize this relaxed feeling as it moves through your feet, into your ankles, up into your calves, and finally into your thighs. Continue slow deep breathing as you experience your legs beginning to feel heavy. Visualize this sensation of calm moving through your hips and stomach as your muscles go limp and the tensions disappear. The sound of the ocean mixed with the stillness of your body begins to move you into a deep state of calm. Now, visualize this relaxed feeling as it moves from your upper arms to your lower arms, then

your wrists and hands, allowing your upper body to feel heavy and calm. Continue slow deep breathing as you allow your shoulders to drop and the muscles in your neck and jaw to relax. Let your mouth hang open and your muscles go limp. Your whole body is becoming completely relaxed, heavy, still, and calm. There is no worry, no struggle just peace and serenity.

PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION

Progressive muscle relaxation can be effectively utilized as needed to help reduce stress, as maintenance in a relaxation program, and to help induce sleep. The technique is simple and involves the tightening and relaxing of muscle groups throughout the body. First, we will tighten a specific muscle group, and then bring your awareness to how the muscle feels when tense. Hold it for seven seconds, release it suddenly, and bring your awareness to how the muscle now feels relaxed. Follow this with a deep breath to the bottom of your lungs. Tensing and relaxing various muscle groups throughout the body can help produce a deep state of calm. Let's begin by closing our eyes and taking a deep breath. As you breathe in and out, allow your worries and concerns to drift away. Now, let's begin with the muscles around your eyes and forehead. Tighten the muscles and hold it 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and release, deep breath. Press your tongue against the roof of your mouth and tighten your jaw muscles, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and release. Allow your muscles to relax and your mouth to hang open. Now

push your shoulders up, trying to touch your ears, and hold it, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and release, deep breath. Move to the muscles in your upper back, try to push your shoulder blades together and hold it 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and release, deep breath. Moving to your right arm we tighten the bicep, triceps, wrist and hand, tightening them all and hold it 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, release. Now, we'll do the same thing with our left arm the bicep, triceps, wrist and hand tensing all the muscles and hold it 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, release, deep breath. As you move to the muscles in your stomach, you begin to feel your upper body becoming heavy and calm. Tighten your stomach muscles and hold it, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and release. As the tensions continue to leave your muscles, you feel your body relaxing more and more. Next, we move to our right leg. Tighten your thigh, calf all the way down to your ankle and hold it, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, release, deep breath. Moving to our left leg we tighten the thigh, calf, and down to the ankle tensing them all and hold it, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and release, deep breath. Your body is heavy. Your mind is calm as you drift deeper and deeper into total relaxation.

GUIDED IMAGERY

A HIGHER PLACE ON THE HILL

It is a dark cloudy day, and the winter wind blows cold against your face. Gazing at the mountain that stands before you, you begin to contemplate the journey that lies ahead. Your desire is to reach the summit, for legend has it that a peaceful state of calm exists there. And that is something you long to experience. As you begin the ascent your mind moves to thoughts of worry and fear. Will I be able to make it? What if I slip and fall? Why didn't I just stay where I was? I never should have tried this? However, you continue to push on, telling yourself, "I have come too far to turn back now." Then, there is change. The dark clouds part and rays of sun begin to shine through. The sun warms your body and mind, and with the warmth comes the feeling of hope. The hope one experiences when moving from dark to light. The hope one experiences of reaching their destination. And you carry on with a renewed energy and desire. Finally, you are there, and even though your body is tired, your mind is wide awake and in a state of passive watchfulness. The clouds are gone, and the sun is shining bright. You inhale a deep breath of fresh air and begin to smile; the light glows ever brighter. As you slowly scan

the horizon, you begin to hear a beautiful sound, a hypnotic melody. Everything is exactly as it should be. No superior or inferior, just the truth of the moment. Your mind is clear. Your heart is open. You feel light and serene. This is a new frontier where the past is the past. It is no more. All that is left are the lessons learned. There is an understanding without knowing. You have moved to another place, quiet, calm, still, a place of peace, a place of harmony.

PRACTICING THE ART OF STRUGGLE REDUCTION

Sometime during each day, sit down and close your eyes. Next, take a few deep breaths and observe your thoughts. Don't try to clear your mind or change anything, just observe without intent. Don't push or exert, just relax and observe for several minutes. Then using the DTM journal on the following pages, list any peaceful or struggle thinking that you observed. In the space provided, write a few notes about your thoughts. Remember, there is no right or wrong way to do this. This is not a test or competition. Just a flowing, effortless, awareness of how you are using your emotional energy. Doesn't it make sense to shift your awareness away from any struggle thinking?

Then, in the evening, journal about your perceptions of the day's events. How did those perceptions affect your feelings? Doesn't it make sense to shift your awareness from negative struggle thinking to positive peaceful thoughts?

DAILY DTM SCORE AND SELF-REPORT

Do the math

Accept, act or delay

Release present moment struggle

Shift awareness to the existing peace

DTM SCORE

Struggle _____ %

Notes:

Peace _____ %

Notes:

SELF-REPORT

In the past 24 hours I:

[illegible]