

HotIronKnowHow & The Skills of Well-being

'How to thrive in this high-pressure life'

An Aide-Memoire

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based on my range of HotIron-KnowHow e-books, written for Teachers, Parents & Students,
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I'd like to suggest that... *at the heart of Well-being is the individual's ability (the will & the skill) to create something beautiful of whatever life throws your way, whether setbacks or successes, tragedies or triumphs.*

So, how do we develop such well-being?

You will know that metal can only be crafted into shape when it's red hot, almost molten. Likewise, we humans transform best under high-intensity situations that take us to the very edge of our present capacities.

HotIron-KnowHow is the name I give to a collection of principles and techniques which allow the individual to cope well with life's inevitable high-intensity situations. We can help ourselves by actively seeking-out hot-iron challenges so as to hone our ability not just to cope, but to thrive, in the face of them. Hot-iron situations are neither fun nor easy, but they have the potential to be positively transforming and profoundly rewarding. Once an individual decides to actively seek-out the rich opportunities within high-intensity challenges, (in their approach to personal relationships, their work and other aspirations), their whole life can blossom because of it.

Our culture greatly admires and rewards an individual's ability to cope well with life's inevitable high-intensity/hot-iron scenarios, whether that means the student acing their exams, the emergency room medic, the court-room barrister, the firefighter, the soldier in combat, the entrepreneur, the on-stage performer, or the loving friend who stays true to us through trying times.

Our culture is equally rewarding of individuals able to create positively-transforming, high-intensity scenarios, for instance the personality who can make us laugh; the storyteller who intrigues us; the friend who devises shared adventures; the coach who designs a profoundly engaging training-regime.

We learn best, and heal best, and forge the truest friendships, in hot-iron situations, at the molten edge of what we can stand/cope with. So we do well to seek out those 'hot crucible' scenarios that allow such satisfying transformation. **'Life is what happens to you; Living is what you do about it'**

Here follow some related 'thoughts and possibilities' for your consideration:

Life is naturally 'high pressure'... peppered with situations that make intense demands upon us; and we tackle these challenges because we're hard-wired by our DNA to want progress... progress in our relationship with life. It's our number one priority because a good rapport with all parts of ourselves and the world around us, helps every creature to survive & thrive.

What makes our mission to 'improve rapport' particularly tricky, is that life is defiantly unpredictable. This is well illustrated by the U.S. National Academy of Sciences who, in 1937, enlisted its most eminent brains to predict the biggest game-changers of the coming decade. That A-team entirely failed to anticipate computers, antibiotics, the jet engine, nuclear fusion... and even the Second World War that was just 18 months ahead! (The above example is cited by a former President of the Royal Society, Sir Martin Rees.) But before we poke fun at their folly, let's just remember we can't even forecast ourselves, let alone life. We human-animals are inherently poor at judging what will motivate us just two weeks hence. So, faced with the unforeseeable, how can we prepare ourselves?

"Duck'n'weave, kid! Duck'n' weave!" is how Baloo the bear puts it to the man-cub Mowgli when teaching him to box (in Disney's fabulous take on *The Jungle Book*). Psychology's most convincing research would completely support that wisdom: *practice being versatile in everything we do, so we can adapt to create something beautiful from whatever life throws our way*. Here follow some suggestions how:

1A) Master the Skills of Relaxation because deep relaxation helps everything in life go better. (In my presentation, I used the example of enigma code-breaking Physicists, and Olympic athletes.) So make it your priority to become skilled at...

Slow-motion deep breathing. Let your abdomen expand outwards while inhaling a slow, deep breath, perhaps taking 6 or more seconds to fill your lungs. Simply Pause that held breath, *without clamping shut your vocal chords*, then exhale slowly aiming to take even longer on that outward breath. This is the polar opposite of the shallow, fast panting that characterises hyper-anxiety. Slow-deep breathing works because it activates the vagus nerve which strongly connects and deeply relaxes your brain, vocal chords, lungs, heart and guts, and serves to slow and calm these key areas. A dozen good breaths of this ilk, can change your whole internal demeanour. (Singing of all sorts can help serve this purpose, too, because good full-hearted singing often uses a breathing style that stimulates the vagus.)

Experience the mind-body benefits of whole-body shaking and bouncing, by reading about this simple yet powerful technique used in the Chinese medicine/martial-art/exercise system known as Qigong... meaning Life-Energy Movement (The technique is called Shaking the Tree, but is known as the Shaking Cure among African and Aboriginal cultures). It requires you just to rhythmically shake/bounce your whole body as one, up and down, at varying tempos to suit your needs....anything from a light bounce... to a really fast and exhilarating shake.... all as a means of vibrating-out tensions held in literally every and any part of your body: face, vocal chords, shoulders, stomach, guts.

After an emotional-shock, any animal, including humans, will tremble spontaneously for many minutes as their whole nervous system re-balances itself. It's a deeply healthy response, which the shaking technique described here is simply mimicking. This deliberate 'whole-body trembling' is also strongly akin to a vigorous form of improvised freestyle dancing... and results in much the same instinctive pleasure.

Emotions are 'catching', and anyone engaging empathetically with emotionally-charged individuals as part of your daily work (school teachers, nurses, therapists), would benefit greatly from routinely shaking-out the 'embodied emotions' that are part & parcel of empathetic interpersonal encounters. An immediately helpful routine would be to do so first thing in the morning, before lunch, and when you get in from work.

The shaking cure can also have strong therapeutic uses: if while doing the technique you imaginatively rehearse in your mind's eye any upsetting memories (or vividly picture future events that are causing you anxiety), the combination of that imagination and this physical action can considerably lessen the trouble those thoughts cause you, and will also improve how you deal with them in real life.

Apply the power of slow-motion: when life feels like the wrong sort of rush, there are profound and immediate benefits in going 'slow motion'. For instance, the more slowly we speak, the calmer and more considered we feel and sound, and the easier it is for a listener to digest our meaning. Experiment with just how slowly you can speak, and note the immediate benefits it brings you and your listener. Musical virtuosos will occasionally practice pieces as slowly as possible while still maintaining a recognisable melody, all as a means to aid their mental-focus and muscle-memory. Going super-slow helps draw the distinction between pushing life... and leading it. *In a world that insists on ever more speed, we have ever more need for the rebalancing ability of slow motion.*

Relaxation allows far greater flexibility in your body, emotions, and thought; so you could frequently during the course of a day, use all three of slow-motion breathing, and speaking, and 'shaking/bouncing' out of the excessive tensions', all as a means to relax your whole system for enhanced performance & deeper rapport.

1B) Emotionally & Physically Decompress at the end of the working day, with a vigorous activity like full-voiced singing, or zumba, or shadow-boxing, or running. (Ancient Spartans would sing while going into battle! Could you sing while exercising?)

It's noteworthy, too, that sweat-breaking exercise for at least 30 minutes four times per week has proven itself to be the most effective anti-depressant and anti-anxiety regime.

1C) Recuperate with peace & quiet; at least 9 hours sleep (for teenagers); 8 for adults; time in Nature; nourishing food and ideas. High-achievers are good at resting & recuperating in all the right ways.

1D) Rebalance by being a Renaissance All-Rounder: find one or more activities about which you're passionate and which make demands upon you that are *equal and opposite* to your work.

Be sure to use all of your 4 dimensions... your artistic, logical, athletic and social abilities, because this balance will help you reach further in all directions. Note how Nelson Mandela was a good heavy-weight boxer and keen footballer well into his middle years; while Beryl Markam, (unjustly forgotten from our history books) was the very first person ever to fly solo from England across the Atlantic (in 1936). Beryl was also a champion with horses in her teens and 20s; and when age just 40, wrote her stunning memoirs, *West with the Night*, which the Nobel Laureate Ernest Hemingway described as "bloody wonderful!" It seems that multiple passions can be used to balance and fuel each other.

2) 'Embrace life!'

Why might your face to face, here & now activities, be more powerful and important than all things digital which so often perniciously lie to us that life will go better if only we have 'more stuff, faster, easier, and from further away'.

All the evidence from lives that go well, protests exactly the opposite: it's exactly because life is becoming more coldly digital and distanced, that we all need to find ways to be more close-up, eye to eye, hands-on and tangibly engaged with the real humans around us. Hence, the vital contribution of Antidote Activities during which we literally 'hold someone's life in our hands' (...or are held ourselves): partner-dancing, ceilidh dancing, contact sports, massage, and the hands-on, close-quarter martial-arts (Ju-Jitsu, Aikido, Judo, Women's Self-Defense). It's also been shown that group-singing of all sorts, and group-yoga, bring exactly the same benefits as the above forms of benevolent social touch. This particular group of activities have all proven themselves to be powerful antidotes to the physical isolation and lack of real belonging that are pandemic now for young and old alike. Did Rene Descartes miss the point, perhaps, because the best proof we're alive, is our rapport with the world around us: "*I share, therefore I am.*" What I call 'Benevolent Touch' is a vital vitamin for our well-being. We're deeply social creatures, and all of life goes far better for individuals who learn that kind of close-quarter know-how. It brings a profound sense of belonging and empathy. (Enjoy: '*The Body*

Keeps the Score', by Boston University Psychiatry Professor Bessel van der Kolk, autumn 2014.)

3) Creatively Channel the energy of your most powerful emotions (the love, anger, shame, loneliness, regret, fear, jealousy), rather than have that emotional energy de-rail you, or you trying to anaesthetise the emotional power by means of unhelpful habits (i.e. the pills, over-eating, internet, alcohol, workaholism, or escapist-fantatising).

Positively & creatively *transform* how you feel by 'Creating not consuming'; i.e. channel your most powerful emotions, don't anaesthetise/numb them. Explore the philosophy of '*Doing beautifully rather than looking beautiful*' ... because what you actually do, is FAR more important to the fauna & flora of the world around you, than what you look like, say, feel, think or write.

On which note: **what fear will you befriend this term? How can you overcome life-inhibiting fears with a dozen hours of training?** For instance, the very natural but soluble fear of public speaking, of rejection, of confrontation, of failure, or simply of dancing in public while sober. Do you know the natural formula that can help resolve your fears of whatever sort? Psychotherapy knows a great deal about helping you overcome such. Learning to do so is a straightforward skill, no different from the learning-process required for a sport, a musical instrument, or a foreign language; and overcoming a deep fear is a skill that can be acquired in a matter of hours not years. Make it your mission to find out exactly how. Nick's ebook, *HotIronLIVING*, is one such source. (*Clue*: the technique involves your vivid imagination brought together with the skills of relaxation (see above).

Why is it SO important to learn to take the initiative using 'Healthy Aggression'? - whereby you 'attack the problem with well-chosen strategies', rather than feel helplessly bullied by events around you. (Aggression is from the Latin literally meaning 'step towards'; it does not imply violence nor malevolence.) Healthy Aggression is as important for tackling exam questions, as it is for fending-off other people's self-serving or bullying demands upon you, or dealing with advertising lies and fashion drivel, or rejecting group-pressures to conform to unhelpful behaviours like boozing, bulimia, bullying or facebook. An individual needs to be aggressively 'Can-Do' in the face of such numerous challenges, as opposed to internalising the sense of upset via passive-aggressive responses such as sulking, psycho-somatic illness, self-numbing with substance-abuse, and self-harming. (Serious self-harming, or reckless risk-taking behavior... whether in a youngster or an adult... is so often a result of the individual feeling bullied, or unloved.)

The exemplary evidence from the 75 years of The Harvard Study of Adult Development suggests that if we don't learn to honour our aggressive emotions with healthily-aggressive creative action, we will most likely fall ill in mind & body.

On the subject of nourishment, when was the last time you had 'a Fast' (i.e. cutting something out of your daily life for a while) : a fast from rush, from worry, from texts and emails and internet, from TV and facebook, caffeine and cologne, make-up and glossy magazines? Could you go without for a day, a week, a month? Such abstinence allows you to weigh the pros and cons. Likewise, when you do 'consume' (a film, a book, a play, a magazine, or www.ted.com), are you sure you're truly nourishing and inspiring yourself, or are you accidentally poisoning or diluting yourself with media lies and pernicious drivel. We could be as discriminating about what we read and listen to, (and with whom we spend our time), as what we choose to eat.

4) Don't hide your Trapped Emotional Pains (i.e. the psychological traumas that every life must encounter) and their seriously debilitating symptoms of body, behaviour, mind & soul: the headaches and IBS, sleepless nights & skin irritations, anxieties and depressions, the avoidance and addictions, and generally behaving in ways you don't wish to; i.e. the whole range of problems that can be caused in part or whole by an unhappiness of your mind & soul. If there's something making life a misery, either something in the present, or some incident or situation way back in the past, then find the courage to confide in some trusted mentor, so as to

make a plan-of-action for seeking expert professional therapeutic support to overcome the upset. Psychotherapy's ability to help you successfully remedy such 'emotional shrapnel' stuck in your mind-body system, (remedy it by using natural techniques over a course of perhaps eight or ten 90-minute sessions, not drugs), has all come a very long way in even the last 5 years. Your asking for skilled help... your daring to share what is most often a secret misery... will be painful, yes, and require your great determination. The reward for working with an experienced therapist will be your whole system enjoying a far greater state of health benefitting every single aspect of your life. (See Nick's ebook, *HotIronHEALING*, to read more on this subject relevant to every individual irrespective of your age.)

KintsuKuroi is the Japanese craft meaning 'Golden Repair', whereby the damaged porcelain pot is so skilfully repaired with molten precious metal, that it is eventually rendered far more wonderful than before it was damaged. This is akin to what can become of the skilfully healed trauma. Every life will endure severe wounds and setbacks; how well you heal these can be the making of your future. For example, the Horse Whisperer, Monty Roberts, who had a horribly bullying father, yet rose to international acclaim through his own application of gentleness. Or, the world-class actors, Emily Blunt and Rowan Atkinson, who each have struggled with a lifelong stammer, have earned their fortunes through the spoken word and public performance. The study of well-being suggests these folks succeeded not in spite of, but exactly because of, their harsh experiences: they channeled the intense emotional energy from the sense of frustration and imprisonment, into a 'creative and beautiful revenge'.

Do you know the simple NHS-recommended first-aid protocol (approved by NICE) for how to immediately help a child or adult in the event of a traumatising incident? Did you know there is a 30 day period known by therapists as 'the golden month' in which the distressing mind & body effects of psychological trauma (shock/emotional-wound) should usually be allowed to calm and heal naturally *without any medication whatsoever*; thereafter, one of two specific psychotherapies (EMDR or trauma-focused CBT) should immediately be sought through your GP. (My 12-page guide, called *First-Aid for Emotional-Shock*, was co-written in 2014 with a King's College London University Professor of Medicine, and is available as an ebook from my website, intended for a wide general-readership in schools, the workplace, and at home.)

5) Learning/training scenarios require several essential ingredients for swift, satisfying, skills-acquisition: for instance, take yourself to the 'learning edge' of what you can't do yet (i.e. don't fool yourself by practising the easy old stuff); keep your training highly-realistic and perhaps even harder than the real thing, even if you have to slow your initial practice right down to a snail's pace; you need immediate and good-quality feedback with immediate opportunities to remedy your actions until you're feeling competent; invest 100% focus and effort, yet learn to relax while doing so; 'Imaginatively Rehearse' all the possibilities. See *HotIronLEARNING*

6) Study Lifetimes by reading autobiographies and inviting interviews, so you can learn in detail how inspiring individuals (in your local life and far beyond it) acquired their exceptional skills, and overcame heart-breaking personal challenges, by channeling their most powerful emotional energies into improving their real life. (Note how one credible study at the City of London University (2009) found that half of all successful entrepreneurs were told by their schools they had 'learning impediments', often akin to dyslexia).

The implication, as stated in theme 4 above, is that 'extraordinary ability' is developed not in spite of, but because of, the 'extraordinary hardships' created by one set back/disability or another.

Could you 'compare & contrast' the lives of some much admired individuals? (And dare to examine exactly how other lives might have 'come unstuck'?) A subject-teacher could routinely pause to consider with their year group, the particular life-dynamics of the leading figures of the past and present in their academic subject. For the study of lifetimes, I highly commend three recently published books: Chris Hadfield's *An*

Astronaut's Guide to Life on Earth; Malcolm Gladwell's *David & Goliath*; *West with the Night*, by Beryl Markham.

Posters of inspiring individuals on classroom walls, could bear at least two pertinent questions: *How exactly did they train to be so good? What personal adversities did they face up to and eventually gain strength from?*

7.) The Harvard Study of Adult Development (led by Psychiatry Professor George E. Vaillant) that followed 824 lifetimes for over seven decades from youth to the grave, concluded that children who 'felt loved' when growing up, averagely earned two-and-a-half times as much as those who did not feel loved; and were five times more likely to play sport and take holidays (both being strong indicators of a good quality of life). However, the study also clearly showed that even an unloved childhood can be wonderfully repaired by learning to create and embrace love in one's adult years. The message is strong: if you want to give yourself the best chance of a highly rewarding and healthy life, *then get good at loving*. Which brings us back to 'embracing life', because loving is flesh & blood stuff (*not digital*); creating love needs you there in person, sharing adventures with the other person, and daring to involve yourself shoulder to shoulder with their real-life troubles and joys. That's how we make dear friends and give love a good chance.

Consider how you can 'Love Wisely': the friend who challenges you to do your very best and invites you to share new and outward-bound adventures, rather than simply sit and consume (food, booze, computer games, DVDs). Or the parent who teaches and encourages the child to do things entirely by themselves in every aspect of daily life, so the child can rapidly grow strong and skilled (rather than the parent giving pocket-money or accidentally weakening the child with well-meant assistance that undermines the learning opportunities). The strategy on both counts, is 'Teach an individual to fish, and you feed them for life'. *That is loving wisely*.

Now a selection of other vital topics from Nick's e-books on All-round Well-being:

A teenager routinely needs a full 9 hours of sleep (including naps) in any 24 hour period, (preferably synchronised with dawn and dusk, i.e. bedtimes adjusted throughout the year). **Insufficient Sleep** not only leads to poor and belligerent decision-making, (you're literally drunken with exhaustion!), it also perniciously erodes your bonds to all that you treasure most - your loved-ones, missions, and values. (Einstein would routinely sleep 10 hours per day, and 11 ahead of a particularly challenging task.)

Caffeine is an enemy-in-disguise re your good moods and recuperative sleep. Why not experiment with a two week 'fast' from caffeine (and sugared drinks and chocolate), to spot the over-riding benefits after the pain of withdrawal. For a child and teenager, lots of good sleep will make you a MUCH more efficient & cheerful learner; and will help a growing body realize its full potential, because your bones, muscles, skin, digestive system, and brain, they all need an average 9 hours of good sleep per 24. (Read the work of Russell Foster, Oxford University Professor of Circadian Neuroscience, and his new book, *The Rhythms of Life*, 2014)

The British Medical Association estimate that 6 in 10 Brits are Vitamin D deficient by February each year (and deficiency symptoms can include low energy, aches & pains, and mood depression). Vitamin D is usually dispensed by Nature through sunlight on the skin, but it doesn't work through glass, and it's hard to glean sufficient doses from your food. However, after a simple blood-test, a simple D3 supplement prescribed by your GP can immediately remedy deficiencies. (NOT suitable for pregnant women unless prescribed by your GP!)

Actively Critique the world around you, and the way it currently does things. For instance...

Why sit, when you can stand? In Denmark, it's now compulsory for all workplaces to enable people to stand, if they so choose, at 'standing-desks' while they type, phonecall or study, because excessive sitting is just so unhelpful for the human body and spirit. Life goes so much better when we literally stand-up to its challenges. *Could your school offer standing desks... in the library, perhaps?*

The need to be Courageous: Mayo Angelou, CS Lewis, TS Eliot, Winston Churchill, General Slim...all have written very clearly about the most important human virtue being 'Courage'. (I shall define courage as knowing what you need to do, but it hurts like hell to get yourself to actually do it...because of the fear...or because of the sheer painful effort required.) It is so widely regarded as the foremost virtue, because without courage one cannot express love, nor do the right thing, nor fully apply any of your other virtues.

The good news is, courage can be developed through considerably exercising it, just like you do a muscle. But it can also be over-strained and even suddenly collapse because of excessive demands. (Recommended reading: *The Anatomy of Courage*, by the celebrated physician Lord Moran MC, with a substantial foreword by SAS General Sir Peter de La Billiere, MC, in the Robinson 2007 edition of the book.)

Caveat concerning Courage: explore & experiment courageously/daringly, yes; but never risk more than you can afford to lose. To this end, apply some 'Strategic Pessimism' by daring to imagine what could possibly go wrong, and then take sufficient precautions. **In other words, beware the dangers of 'ungrounded optimism' of 'unchecked positive thinking'**. Apply some 'Strategic Pessimism' to vividly envisage and then prepare oneself against the 'worse-case scenarios' and the entirely unpredictable problems that might result from a course of action or inaction. That is to say, we tend to drive too fast, and take other foolish chances in every dimension of our life, simply because we haven't dared take time to envisage/imagine the truly dire potential consequences of some course of action or inaction. (The iconoclastic books, *'Black Swan'* and *'Anti-fragile'*, by the risk-analyst and social-philosopher, Professor Nassim Nicholas Taleb, have awoken the world to the tragic dangers of rose-tinted thinking, both for individuals and for society.) Apply your Courage with Wisdom.

Finally, I cite Michelangelo's statue of David (poised to do battle in the Valley of Elah) as the artistic embodiment of many desirable qualities in any individual: note the wonderfully relaxed body in the face of high-pressure; eyes focused and expression resolute with healthy aggression; naked athleticism not Nike clothing; the ability to do things beautifully using science (the physics of the sling-shot), and craft (note the over-large, elegantly powerful 'can-do' hands), all brought together so as to unleash a spirit of well-grounded confidence to attack and defeat the bullying problem, (Goliath, in this case), for the sake of the 'home team'. This is wise courage. It is noteworthy, too, that the single block of marble from which *David* was so finely cut, (in Florence, 1504, almost 100 years before Shakespeare wrote Hamlet), had been a discarded piece for 25 years. No one realised its potential.

Thank you so much for reading! I offer clear guidance and robust evidence on many of the above themes in my one-hour Audio-book introductions, and the full-story, full-colour E-books on the subjects of Living, Healing, and Learning, all co-authored with King's College London University Professor of Public Health Medicine, Richard Sullivan, PhD, MD.

You're warmly welcome to email me personally, and in complete confidence, via Cambridge@NickBaylis.com