

Five Tasks of Constructive Rest

Begin constructive rest in semi-supine position, on your back with your knees bent. Search for the leg position that feels balanced and easy, which is usually feet apart and angled slightly outward, knees just softly bent, not sharply bent. If your lower back is tense, you may need to rest your knees on each other for a time. If you are too injured or tense to be in supine position, do constructive rest seated or draped over a therapeutic ball until you are comfortable lying down. If you are pregnant, you may decide that semi-supine is not appropriate in your circumstance. You can look forward to how great it will feel in the months after delivery! Some of you may want to support your heads with a book or some other object to accommodate neck tension that will later be released. A cervical pillow can be used, especially if you have over-straightened your cervical spine and need to restore the natural curve.

There are five tasks of constructive rest. All the other four depend on the first: the cultivation of an integrated body awareness. Many people like to begin with the tactile sense, the sense of touch. The skin that protects our bodies is loaded with tactile receptors, giving us vital information about temperature, movement of air, pressure, texture, contact, damp and dry. Similar receptors lie interior to our bodies in certain locations, for instance, the nasal passages and the oral cavity. In constructive rest you want to bring all your tactile sensation into awareness and let it live there.

Now, continuing to build body awareness, do not give up your tactile sensation, but do go interior to it and find your kinesthetic sensation, which is coming from sense receptors of an entirely different type and location. Kinesthetic receptors are in muscle and connective tissue, concentrated at the joints. These receptors flood your brain with information about your position, which is to say the relationship of bone to bone. Your brain will be getting this information whether you are aware of it or not. In constructive rest, we become aware of position and movement, for instance, the motions of breathing. We also become aware of our size. As you let yourself be fully aware of your position, your moving, and your size, you will learn whether you are tense, whether you are symmetrical or twisted. Kinesthetic experience ranges, as does tactile, from miserable through delicious. If you're uncomfortably tense, just let yourself be aware of it. Awareness is the means to change.

Next, look to be sure that all your emotions are in awareness, in all their complexity and intensity. Sometimes we seem to feel only one emotion, but more often we experience a rich braid of emotion. Let yourself be aware of all the strands of that braid. Artists often speak of building “emotional muscle.” This is a useful metaphor, but rich, complex emotion is for everyone, not just artists.

Now, add to all your tactile, kinesthetic, and emotional awareness anything other: pain, if there is pain, all the sensations of pleasure, hunger, thirst, anything. Notice that you can feel pain at the same time as all the other sensation. Sensing pain in context is the key to recovery from painful injury. It is the key to managing chronic pain, should that be required. It is this bringing together of all experience in a single gestalt that we call integrated awareness: all the discrete bits of information are in relation to each other. Your attention can shift easily among the items in awareness. Some come into focus as others lie on the periphery of attention, waiting to come to center as they are needed.

When you finish any session of constructive rest, make no effort to keep its benefits. That would just introduce some strain. Just get up and go about your business, knowing that your brain will assimilate the experience of constructive rest. That’s its job.

Task two is coming to the greatest degree of muscular freedom you can find in the moment. Using your body awareness, let yourself register any tensions in your body. Inquire whether the tensions form a pattern. You will probably find that you automatically begin to free out of tension as you become aware of it. Loss of awareness is one of the main causes of tension. It seems the body doesn’t like to be abandoned by awareness.

We know from the observations of F. M. Alexander that the most common pattern of muscular tension is the one he called downward pull, which begins with tension in the neck and spreads to the rest of the body, compressing the frame, reducing its stature. Knowing this pattern to be ubiquitous, we do well to attend to it first. If downward pull is not present, if your neck is nicely free and not imposing tension on the rest of the body, then just enjoy the freedom and see if there are other tensions you may release. You may find patterns of tension that are peculiar to you. Awareness is key to release. Intention is the means.

Task three is to work on breathing, using your body awareness and your increasing freedom. Typically, people continue to free muscularly as they enhance rib movement and abdominal wall and pelvic floor movement. It's a virtuous circle: releasing muscles restores breathing; breathing well frees muscles.

How does your breathing feel? Is it limited? You may be breathing twenty or more times per minute when you go into constructive rest. You may be breathing six to eight times per minute when you finish because your ribs are free to move through a greater excursion as you release out of tension. You are getting more oxygen with each breath so your brain triggers fewer of them. The larger, slower breaths can feel delicious.

Does your breathing seem coordinated or chaotic? Does breathing involve a long, easy sweep of movement top to bottom in the torso, both on inhalation and on exhalation? If not, you may be manipulating your abdominal wall without even knowing that you are, interfering with coordination.

Attend to rib movement. Feel the movement of all twenty-four ribs at the costo-vertebral joints in back and at the cartilage in front. Palpate the whole expanse of cartilage along the sternum top to bottom and then on down along the bottom of the ribs at the top of the abdominal wall. Follow the cartilage all around until you bump up against your floating ribs. If you have mapped that cartilaginous region as bone, let yourself appreciate the texture and the movement of the cartilage to correct your map forever.

Enjoy the excursion of your ribs up and out on inhalation and then follow the movement down and in on exhalation. Ask yourself whether you are allowing the full excursion down and in. Many singers, for instance, stop short of the full excursion on exhalation. You don't want to be among them. If you really learn to finish a breath in constructive rest, your learning will carry over into singing and speaking, and you will love being able to finish a phrase and a breath at the same time. When you can do this, you will enjoy easy, reflexive inhalations.

Now explore the movement of your abdominal wall in breathing. Remember that we are talking about the abdominal wall front, sides, and back, not just in front. Are you allowing the full movement of the abdominal wall all around in breathing, or is there tension that is

interfering? As you free those big muscles from tension, you will feel a lovely dynamic sensation as the muscles spring back on exhalation.

Constructive rest is an excellent opportunity to explore pelvic floor movement in breathing. You want to be certain there is no interference from tension there so that the pelvic floor can be pushed downward on inhalation, and you similarly want no interference from tension on exhalation, so that the pelvic floor can spring back as the pressure from the viscera comes off. In singing, that rebound or recoil provides one aspect of breath support.

Task four is cultivating an accurate, adequate body map. As before, secure your body awareness, find muscular freedom, breathe beautifully, and then work on the integrity of your body map. If your body map is already accurate and adequate to your purposes, you may want to refine it, make it more detailed. If not, simply move on to task five.

Task five. Work on your relationship to space and time. Why? A right relationship to space and time for constructive rest turns out to be perfect for many situations in life, especially performance.

There are three states of waking sensory awareness. One is introspection, where all or most of your attention is on yourself. A second is extrospection, where all or most of your attention is on what's outside you, on the world around you. A third is inclusive awareness, in which you are aware of yourself and the world. That's the state or condition we want to cultivate in constructive rest.

You might begin your approach to space by looking all around you and putting yourself in relationship to everything you see. "Ah, yes, this is where I am," you say, "in this space." Let your hearing help you by registering every available sound. Use your tactile sense to tell you about the space, for instance, the nature of the floor, the continuity of the floor. What can your emotions tell you about the space? Let your emotions really live in relationship to the space.

Notice that you can claim for your moving – in this case, your breathing and micro movement – any amount of space you choose. It needn't be confined to the room. You can claim the known universe for your moving if you like, or a space the size of a cathedral, which may be what the role you

are creating requires. Musicians can be in a tiny practice room and still claim a space the size of an auditorium for their moving. This is likewise a key to effective public speaking. In preparing your speech, you claim a space at least as big as your audience will occupy, protecting yourself from the shock to your nervous system that would come from having to rapidly adjust to a larger space as you move to the podium. You're already there!

Many people learn as they claim larger spaces for their movement that much of their former tension came from the small, bubble-like space they were confined to earlier. The small space was the stimulus to which they responded by tensing muscles.

Now, I want to be very clear about one thing because there is sometimes confusion on this point. I am not talking about imagining a performance space. That would be both difficult and counterproductive. You need your imagination for other purposes. I'm talking about claiming in the moment, right here, the same size space in which you will perform. It's the skill of being in relationship to the space around you. Eventually, an audience will fill that space, and it's your job to be truly in relationship to your audience.

Musicians can use constructive rest to put themselves in a right relationship to time, time being the stuff of rhythm. Alla Rakha instructed Mickey Hart, "Rhythm is just time, and time can be carved up any way you want." Musicians cannot reliably carve up time they do not perceive, and the perception is sensory. Constructive rest is the perfect opportunity to train oneself to perceive time and claim it as one's own.

Remember not to introduce any strain into the end of constructive rest. Don't try to keep your body awareness or your freedom or your lovely breathing or your corrected body map or your good relationship to space and time. Let them go and return to them anytime you like. It's like coming home.

Barbara Conable, July 2014