



THE INNER GAME *of* STRESS

Introduction

A world-class golfer once came to me for coaching. She told me she needed help with the stress she felt when she was playing the last few holes of any competition in which she was in contention for the title. “My hands begin shaking, and I lose touch with the feel of the club,” she said. Her sense of pressure was heightened by the fact that if she could win just two more tournaments, she would be a candidate for inclusion in the Golf Hall of Fame.

Since it was impossible to simulate the circumstances of her stress, I asked the golfer two simple questions:

“What is the goal of golf?”

“Why do you play?”

Her initial answers were clear and simple. “The goal of golf is to complete each round with as few strokes as possible.” She continued, “Why do I play? First, I love the environment, second, I love competition, and third, I love expressing my God-given talent.”

I watched her closely as she responded. “So far your hands aren’t shaking,” I said. No foreseeable change would threaten the stated foundation of why she was playing. “Are there any other reasons you can think of for why you’ve dedicated yourself to the game of golf?” I asked.

She reflected for a few moments, and then exclaimed, “Yes, there are other reasons. First, I owe something to golf. Before golf I was a nobody. Golf has made me someone. And another thing, I owe something to my loyal fans who depend on me to be in contention in every tournament.”

She paused, looked at me, and said, “Now my hands are getting shaky, aren’t they?”

“Yes, they are,” I agreed. As soon as she shifted from talking about her love of golf to the judgments and expectations of others, as well as her identification with the results, nervousness was inevitable. She was already looking down the road, to a time when she would no longer have the loyalty of fans or the identity of a pro golfer. She possessed phenomenal skills, but her inner stress—the fear of not living up to her self-image or the image projected upon her—was causing her stress

and getting in the way of her performance and enjoyment of the game.

When she began to see what was blocking her, she regained her composure and started talking about all the effort that was required to stay in top form to play professional golf. It was as if she were seriously considering if it was worth it. She decided it was. Although she didn't win the next tournament she played she was victorious in the one after it. Her elation was clear. She literally jumped for joy, into the lake beside the eighteenth hole.

This pro golfer was struggling with a reality that faces each one of us: making the distinction between who we are and what we do. We play many roles in life—parent, spouse, golfer, executive—but that outer reality is not who we truly are. One task of the Inner Game is to make that distinction, and then to allow our selves to shine through without the impediment of concepts and expectations that are not in line with our own purpose. Once we do, we can be free of stress and play at our best,—be it on the golf course, on the job, or in life itself. As you read through this book, you will find many examples of people who changed habitual thinking that induced stress and was not aligned with their own growth and evolution. Hopefully, these examples will inspire you to reflect and to find your own way towards being free of stress.

The inner game and stress

Before going on, a few words about the Inner Game. It can be said that everyone is playing an inner game, whether they recognize it or not. That means that while we are all involved in *outer* games (endeavors and relationships in the outside world), we are at the same time faced with *inner* obstacles, such as fear, self-doubt, frustration, pain and distractions, which prevent us from expressing our full range capabilities and enjoying our time to the utmost. The premise of the Inner Game—the principles, methods and tools I offer to help people win both inner and outer games—has remained constant: Success in life relies on balanced attention to both games.

At the heart of the Inner Game methodology are three principles;

1. Non-judgmental awareness.
2. Trust in one's own self.
3. The exercise of free and conscious choice.

I originally applied the learning methodology that sprang from these principles in sports coaching, and later in corporate settings. I found that people could learn to overcome their inner obstacles. Without technical instructions, they could improve any skill, unlearn unproductive mental and physical habits, and enjoy themselves in the process. Seeing this happen day after day while coaching athletes and executives gave me profound confidence that anyone could learn naturally and make the changes they wanted in their lives.

There is no question that external events can invite stress. If you're worried about being laid off from your job, which is a pretty common situation these days, that's a big stressor. The question is, can you make a distinction between your job and who you are? This ability to distinguish between self and circumstances can be learned, and the payoff is clarity and perspective that will alleviate stress and reach your external goals.

Mastering your inner game allows you to go through the challenges of life without becoming sick from chronic stress. The secret lies in knowing that you have choices about how you look at external events, how you define them, how you attribute meaning to them, and how you react to them mentally and emotionally. One core belief of the Inner Game is that every person has the internal wisdom to bypass those frustrations and fears that pull them into the negative cycles of stress.

For example, while I was helping tennis players learn to improve their forehands, backhands, and serves, I was really helping them learn how to perform more effectively on the inside. Learning to *learn* was more important than hitting the ball in the court; learning to overcome fear was more important than winning any given match. Learning the art of relaxed concentration could be applied to any endeavor on or off the tennis court. Thus the lessons from sports became fundamental in life. When the inner and outer games were in sync, stress decreased, performance improved, learning happened naturally, and there was heightened enjoyment of the activity. Some athletes call it "playing in the zone." The inner game opens the possibility that we can play in the zone in everyday life.

Another unique value of the Inner Game model and tools is that they tap into our natural capacity to fulfill essential needs. The human gift to learn can last a lifetime. Children learn to walk, talk and play from enjoyment and curiosity. These processes are natural and pleasant. So, too, learning to achieve balance between gearing up to face a challenge and gearing down for rest and relaxation can be simple and enjoyable. We have the natural ability to be wise and calm in the midst

of the barrage of daily external struggles. In this world, such a skill is worth having.

Teaming up with the doctors.

Back in the 1970s when I was writing *The Inner Game of Tennis*, I became friends with two remarkable medical doctors, John Horton and Edd Hanzelik. We had many conversations about our respective work finding a great compatibility in each others' thinking. John and Edd were dedicated to practicing a different kind of medicine, with a focus on treating the whole person, encouraging the individual's full participation in his or her own care, and trusting the innate healing capacity of the human body. The doctors were learning from their patients that chronic stress was the source of many illnesses. They were looking for ways to help their patients resolve stress other than through medications and referrals to psychologists or psychiatrists. The doctors found the Inner Game principles and tools remarkably relevant to their patients' needs.

When I started meeting with Edd and John about the possibility of our working together on a stress seminar, I realized that stress was a lot more serious an issue than the performance of athletes or executives. It was more closely linked to medical problems than I had previously understood. It was, in fact, an open doorway to disease and was a critical factor for a large percentage of the patients that come before physicians.

As I considered working with the doctors, I recalled that on one occasion I had helped an ophthalmologist design a training program for a specific and complex kind of eye surgery. I felt sobered by the fact that what was at stake were eyeballs, not tennis balls or egos. The same sober feeling was present as I talked to the doctors about stress. Health and quality of life were at stake. Here was an opportunity to make a difference with people that transcended performance, and accepting this challenge would come to expand my understanding of the Inner Game.

Several other facts about stress helped me decide to say yes to embarking on a collaboration with the doctors. Chronic stress was not only much more prevalent and harmful than I had realized, but was caused largely by the way people *perceived* the events and circumstances of their lives – and not the reality itself. This put the subject squarely in the middle of my work with the Inner Game. I learned that the remedies offered for chronic stress by the medical community were often

medication-based, and usually failed to address the causes of stress. Other standard remedies, such as exercise, diet, and rest, while good things in themselves, again proved inadequate in addressing the cause. Finally, the doctors made me aware of the latest medical research that supported the fundamental principles and methods used in the Inner Game, and helped me understand the possibility of accessing human abilities that lay deeper than physical or intellectual coordination.

I began to feel that the Inner Game could address the perceptual causes of fear, frustration, and pain in a way that could help people learn, through an enjoyable process of self-discovery. This process was not so much aimed at getting rid of stress as it was at the more positive goal of building a dynamic inner stability, something of inherent value to all human beings, not just when they were in a state of stress.

The promise of the Inner Game

The primary strategy of our stress seminars has been to help people build an inner life that is stable enough to be resilient in the face of the external stressors that inevitably come our way in life. In this book we will offer the fruit of our discoveries and our understandings about how to achieve this stability--and with it the hope that life can be led without the harmful effects of chronic stress.

In the following pages, the John, Edd and I will take you on a journey of learning to play the Inner Game, blending my own work with athletes and executives with the doctors' patient stories and medical discoveries.

In Part 1, we'll lay out the Inner Game principles in the context of stress. You'll find that this understanding alone will begin to produce a change in your stress response. That's the beauty of true learning. It is not an abstract process, but actually creates an organic shift in the way you view the world and respond to it.

In Part 2, we'll help you identify the stress makers in your life, and, more important, your roots of stability. Here the focus will not so much be on the stress you're experiencing as on the innate resources you possess that will keep you anchored in the face of it. Or, as one of our stress seminar participants put it, "When the shit hits the fan, you don't have to hit it too."

Part 3 is the Inner Game toolbox—eight practical and effective tools you can use to increase your stability and combat daily stressors. I have been using these tools for many years with athletes and executives, and we employ them in our seminars. You can pull them out when you're facing a

tough challenge, or just rely on them for daily strength. You can pick and choose those that speak to your circumstances. Knowing you have such a powerful toolbox of support will in itself give you more confidence and inner security. You will be able to make the changes you really want to make in your life.

I once heard that Tiger Woods' Dad coached him about how to deal with stress while playing golf. He told Tiger that it was okay to feel any emotion on the golf course just as long as he did not hang on to it for more than ten steps. A picture comes to mind of Tiger Woods, strolling down the fairway to the green, cool and confident. He seems unaware of the crowd, completely settled within his own realm of comfort, imbued with a quiet energy and concentration. It's not a question of being unaware or of being cut off from the crowd. It's a matter of being able to stay within his skin and not get in his own way. We can all have that quality.