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The Secret of Life

by Larry Mandt, PhD

I have never been a crusader. In fact, I've always been rather "diffident, modest, and shy," to quote Gilbert and Sullivan. But in December of 1992, at the Ericksonian Congress in Phoenix, in the "therapist development track" with Ernest Rossi, I learned something that revolutionized my life and my practice, something that I teach, sooner or later, to everyone I work with--the clients I see, the therapists I supervise, anyone that I casually talk to for more than a few minutes. I've taught this to my wife, and it has revolutionized her in the same way that it did me; I've taught it to my children, and they, of course, think I'm weird and wouldn't be caught dead adopting my views about anything. However, they have seen this behavior and orientation modeled on a daily basis by my wife and myself, and by a sort of osmosis actually are beginning to practice it themselves.

I hate to write. It has never been easy for me, and I agonize over the production of sentences, with a strong tendency to go on and on forever, without any end punctuation. My dissertation adviser once said to me, "Do you realize that this paragraph has only one sentence?" But what I learned in Phoenix that December has led me to write articles, to volunteer to lead workshops, and to accept any opportunity to present this material to others. It led directly to what you are reading at this moment, because when Dave Minden mentioned that he was responsible for soliciting articles for this newsletter, it seemed the most natural thing in the world for me to come forward and offer this article. This was after I had just given a long monolog on the same subject to a gathering of therapists I had just met for the first time. Like I said, I teach it to everybody.

It's the secret of life, I tell people. If you don't teach it to everyone you know, you haven't understood what I've been telling you. It's the biological key that underlies the effectiveness of relaxation therapy, of hypnosis, of meditation, of prayer, of spiritual experience, of psychotherapy. (I told you, before this I was never a crusader--now I talk like this.)

What I learned about in Phoenix was ultradian rhythm. Not circadian rhythm, the cycle of sleeping and waking that generally goes on a 24-hour cycle of 16 hours awake and 8 hours asleep. Give or take a little. I'm up now at 4:30 a.m. on Christmas Eve Day writing this article because it's quiet in the house, and because I just woke up with the opening lines of this article going through my head, and I told you, I hate to write, so when I actually receive some inspiration which will make it easier for me to produce these sentences (and you notice how long they're getting?), I'd be a fool to ignore it. And, it was both my own ultradian rhythm that woke me at that point (more about that in a minute) and the topic of ultradian rhythm that has me so driven that I actually wake up early to spread the news.

So what is it? Another name for it is the basic rest-activity cycle, the BRAC, which runs on a 90-120 minute cycle throughout the day and night, 24 hours a day. It was first noticed in the study of sleep cycles, and rapid eye movement sleep alternating with delta wave sleep is an example of an activity or function that follows an ultradian rhythm. The figure here, taken from Rossi's book *The Twenty-Minute Break: Reduce Stress, Maximize Performance, Improve Health and Emotional Well-Being Using the New Science of Ultradian Rhythms* (what makes you think he's crusading about this too?), depicts the alternation of activity and rest that characterizes the ultradian cycle.

Figure 1

Essentially, over an hour and a half to a two hour period, one experiences a peak of activity, followed by a period of rest. It varies for different people depending on the person and the requirements of the situation, but has certain characteristics that make it easy to spot once you know what you're looking for. At the peak of activity, things go smoothly and efficiently, it's easy to work and to make decisions, both mental and physical activity flow. As we begin to move toward the rest phase of the cycle, efficiency drops off and we tire, become more inefficient mentally and physically, and naturally want simply to rest. (I explain it to clients as though the neurotransmitters communicating between brain and nerve cells simply get "used up" and need to be restored before we can continue functioning, unless it's an emergency.)

This part of the cycle everyone is familiar with. This is when you're having a conversation with someone and simply lose your train of thought or can't think of the word that would complete your sentence. When you walk into the room and scratch your head and think, "Now why did I come in here, what was I looking for?" When you simply can't read anymore because your mind is wandering, or you're yawning at the board meeting, or you need to stretch and get up and walk around, or at 3 p.m. at the conference you simply can't stay awake anymore. Generally what we do as a culture when we enter the rest phase of the ultradian cycle is to deride ourselves for being weak or lazy and then artificially stimulate the production of hormones and neurotransmitters with caffeine, nicotine, sugar, anger or panic so that we override the natural rest period and keep functioning. Utilization of the knowledge of ultradian rhythms, however, has a Zen-like simplicity that makes it easy to remember, and ultimately, to practice: "When I'm tired I rest; when I'm hungry I eat."

If, instead of trying to override the rest phase of the cycle, we simply allow it to happen uninterrupted, this is what happens. When you notice the signs that you are entering the rest phase (mind wandering, yawning, need to nosh on something, need to urinate, boredom, forgetfulness, body tiredness, indecisiveness), simply sit or lie down. After two or three minutes, a "deep, satisfying breath" presents itself to you as your body sinks down into a deeper state of relaxation. Then, for fifteen or twenty minutes, your conscious mind simply wanders, or fantasizes, or remembers pleasant experiences, as you are aware of how comfortable it is simply to be sitting here, breathing, waiting for that periodic deep and satisfying breath. At this point in the cycle, it is so easy to do nothing and so hard to keep on going with your thoughts or your work. During that fifteen or twenty minutes, your body restores itself, your mind integrates its knowledge and activity (and often presents you with the perfect solution to that problem you were struggling with or the memory that you couldn't retrieve), but, best of all, it feels so good. Then, after that fifteen or twenty minutes, you spontaneously wake up, your eyes open, your mind is thinking again and you go on with your activity--you're on the upcurve of the activity cycle, where it is so easy to be active, efficient, and decisive.

That's it. Since December, 1992, I've been utilizing ultradian rhythm in this way (as has my wife and the rest of my family, many of my clients, many of the therapists I supervise, many people I've only had casual contact with). One of the therapists I supervise told me that this information saved her life. I believe her. I usually schedule myself so that I have the opportunity to take two ultradian breaks in a day, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. In fact, at a recent workshop on managed care I heard some of my staff saying "There's Larry, taking his ultradian break" after lunch. In the afternoon, I was alert and they couldn't stay awake for the lecture. People think I'm weird, sometimes I take my break on a bench at the mall, in my car in the parking lot before a meeting, in my office before a session, whenever I need to. I can tell the difference in my thought process and in my level of anxiety or relaxation in my body when I haven't taken my break. If I don't have the full twenty minutes, even two or three minutes is tremendously beneficial, but I try to arrange my schedule in a way that supports my practice of ultradian healing.

I've been a meditator for a long time, but I always had trouble finding the time to meditate in a systematic way. Now I don't formally meditate as much any more, but I consider my ultradian breaks as two twenty-minute meditations that I take every day without fail, far more consistently than I ever was able to meditate. And, if I take my break or meditate when I'm going into the rest phase of the cycle, the meditation is very deep and satisfying.

I recommend that you take this information and apply it in your own life. You can find out more about ultradian rhythm in Rossi's Twenty-Minute Break book or in two of his other books, *The Psychobiology of Mind-Body Healing*, and *Mind-Body Therapy: Methods of Ideodynamic Healing in Hypnosis*, the latter book with David Cheek. After you begin to experience the benefits of the practice in your own life, you'll want to teach it to everyone you know. If you don't, you don't understand what I've been telling you. (Sorry to sound like a crusader, I don't know what's come over me.)