

# SMARTER: STRESS MANAGEMENT & RELAXATION TRAINING ENCIRCLING RELIGION

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*At Harvard Medical School they've got a thing going called Project Smart, acronym for "stress management relaxation training." Since it's religionless, it's not very smart. It would be smarter if it embraced, embodied, or--my preferred word--encircled religion. Thus, my SMARTER....All references are to the article "The Stress-Resistant Person" in this month's HMS Health Letter. This Thinksheet takes the form of an open letter to the author, Raym. B. Flannery, Jr., psychologist at HMS & a member of the Cambridge (MA) Hospital psychiatry department.*

1. Many situational factors, including religion, function variously to increase or decrease stress. That's the way it is with value-clusters in an open society. In politics, eg, think of the stress potential of banner words like freedom, justice, peace, prosperity. As for religion, the 10-segment PBS "Ethics in America" is careful to include on its panel a rabbi, a priest, & a minister: in our pluralistic society, we prefer religious competitive stress to the enforced peace of (to use the formula of 1648) "cuius regio, eius religio," the citizenry required to practice the ruler's religion. But the complexity, with its stress potential, is no valid excuse for neglecting politics or religion.

2. You neglect, avoid, religion in your otherwise excellent SMART program. In your description of stone-age, low-stress life, you rightly include religion: why did you drop it when you extrapolated to the life we should learn to live today & tomorrow, an extrapolation that leaves nothing out but religion?....So my readers will know what I'm talking about, I'll reproduce the pregnant ¶ which leads to your caption, "Can such stone-age habits be learned?"

The hallmarks of contemporary urban life are that it is both sedentary and fast-paced. What we know of the gathering and hunting peoples, who represent the experience of humanity until very recent times, is that they are likely to engage in long walks several times a week, that they have frequent rest periods, and that a good deal of their activity goes on in the context of small, stable, intimate groups. The ritual or religious life of such a community also often imparts a strong sense of purpose to its activities....¶We could speculate that stress-resistant persons have the knack of adapting certain stone-age habits to modern life.

3. In the living of our lives we can be overstressed, even wrecked, both by what we put in & by what we leave out. A physician who leaves out the ritual-religious-centering factor is guilty of iatrogenic disease. Not many in our urban society have actually seen a decapitated chicken running erratically around a barnyard, but all of us have seen headless, centerless human beings stressing themselves out with the worry that if they don't run faster they're going to miss out on something. Being centerless, they are criterionless, without critical consciousness, the power to & process of sorting out the big ones from the little ones & the nothings, choosing a scale of values & sequence of loyalties. Case method, now used extensively in theological schools, began in your school & is well used in the aforementioned "Ethics in America": have you not known many patients who hadn't "a still point in a changing world" (to use a favorite phrase of the physician with whom I studied, Viktor Frankl)? Notice your own words in describing stone-age humanity: "The ritual or religious life of such a community also often imparts a strong sense of purpose to its activities." Why do you fail to carry over to your patients this ancient wisdom?

4. Rightly you preach that we should be about the business of "learning how to live with less." Not a bad definition of a specific religious praxis, viz, asceticism. Why do you fail to make that connection? If you say I'm overarguing from your silence, why in being silent do you open yourself to this attack? Religion could be for you a powerful ally in your preaching the simplification of life. "God seeks in holy love to save us all from aimlessness and sin," as it's put in the Statement of Faith of my own church, Congregational, the United Church of Christ.