

THE INTEGRATIVE HEALTH COACH by John Davidson

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SIMPLE BUT NOT EASY

Just a few days ago, I was invited to work with a group of children in a small charter school in southern Colorado.

There were twenty-five or so, and they ranged in age from kindergarten to third grade.

I shared with them the simple, computer-based biofeedback program with which I have worked for several years – now called the *emWave*®.

emWave is a simple piece of technology that most of you have seen in another form – the pulse and heart rate variability monitors that have long stood by the side of hospital beds.

The original version of *emWave* was created about twenty years ago by the Institute of HeartMath. At this point in time, ample research supports HeartMath's claim that its program decreases stress and improves health in a variety of ways.

In order to get these benefits, a person just has to hold attention in the area of the heart, breathe abdominally in a slow pattern, and experience a sense of appreciation in the area of the heart, and continue to do that frequently throughout the day.

This sounds simple, and it is.

But it's not easy. Our habit is generally to do otherwise.

Yet, when I showed these children how to do it, they were every bit as successful as most adults I have worked with.

Perhaps the biggest challenge is doing the breathing.

I've been very interested to see that most adults that I work with can't – at least without significant coaching over time – do the deep, abdominal breathing that is required by our bodies to deal with stress and support better health.

More interesting to me is that some younger children do a better job of the breathing than some older children and most adults.

It would appear to me that the older we get, the more inclined we are to hold our breath and to harden our bodies – like armor – against the stresses of the world. Trauma starts early and builds up over time.

It's hard to breathe in armor.

Perhaps the hardest thing is to remember when we are stressed, ill, or afraid, is simply to breathe. The second hardest thing seems to be to breathe correctly. Both require learning how to pay attention.

The beauty of the biofeedback is that it shows you when you are *not* doing it, as well as when you are getting better at it. Biofeedback speeds the learning process significantly.

Most adults I work with don't know that they aren't breathing efficiently or effectively. When they see on the screen in front of them, they get it.

But there was something else in this encounter at the charter school that I found interesting.

I've been working for several years to introduce this technology into public schools in the area where I've lived and worked. Despite the extraordinary value of this program as it relates to attention skills at a time when attention skills are declining at an epidemic rate, I've been unable

to get a single public school or college to get beyond the recognition that it is a good idea. Budget – and changing the way things have always been done – is invariably the issue.

Yet, after a single demonstration in a classroom at a charter school, the two teachers with whom I worked were able to make a decision on their own, and to use their own equipment budgets to buy *emWave* equipment without having to convince a chain of command -- a chain that might extend all the way to the state board of education -- that this tiny expenditure might be a good idea.

Every teacher to whom I've shown this program has almost immediately seen its value. On the other hand, it appears to me that public school teachers do not have the time or energy to engage the daunting budget process for a program that hasn't been approved at the state level. It's too hard to get past "we've never done that before" and "we certainly can't do that this year."

As I've written in many prior columns, our children are very much at risk in a culture that is increasingly plagued by stress and a toxic environment.

It is essential that we provide our children with the means to acquire attention skills that support stress management and support of good health, in addition to supporting all other learning.

One way to do that is very simple.

But as long as our institutions continue to do things the way things have been done for decades, despite rapid and huge cultural change, it won't be easy.

As a footnote, the day that this column publishes, I'll be on a plane to India, the country that has studied breathing for thousands of years. My next column will report from there.

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