**How can I enter into rest from difficult feelings?**

In a previous article we have dealt with the relevance of developing relational brain skills (1). We have seen that the development of relational brain skills are determinative for our way of thinking and for giving substance to our identity and emotional skills. A lot of what we call unconscious are acquired skills that are activated faster than the conscious thinking in the brain. It is striking, however, that many conditions for a healthy development are biblically also important values. For example a good joyful individual and group identity, an ability to enter into rest during difficult circumstances, self-control, relatedness and properly dealing with boundaries. In this article I would mainly like to focus on the ability of getting back to rest and joyful peace and joy (shalom) from difficult feelings.

 **Four significant features**

In the book ‘Rare Leadership’ by Marcus Warner and Jim Wilder (2), we find the description of four skills in which exceptional leaders are distinguished from others. These are also matters that are very important in the process of difficult feelings.

1. Remain relational. The skill implies among others that the relationship is more important than the problem. Often, leaders who are only problem-oriented and result driven, become isolated, have a fear of failure and are overexerted. If there is much stress and tension in a relationship, stay in contact with the other person and with God.
2. Behave according to who you are. Respond from your Christian identity in difficult circumstances, otherwise your environment doesn’t know what to expect from you. A consistent personality from a positive attitude is a guarantee to remain yourself in difficult circumstances.
3. Perhaps the most important feature is that a good leader does not get overwhelmed by six difficult feelings (which are embarrassment, anger, anxiety, sorrow, disgust and despondency), but quickly comes into rest, peace and joy.
4. Learning to suffer in a good way. We often try to prevent suffering. We can distinguish different capacities of suffering: in a way a baby does, or a child, an adolescent, parent or elder. In the bible, suffering is related to love. He who loves, must also learn to endure suffering (1Pet.4:13).
5. **Remain relational**

Remain relational toward God and toward others in all circumstances, also in difficult situations. If we want to remain relational, it requires a skill which we could call: ‘developing intimacy with God’. It is a learning process. That means that we do not acquire this skill by a one-time prayer. We need to exercise that skill, each at our own level. We will not all directly have to go through the trials of for example Paul and Stephen. The latter saw, at the moment that he was stoned, the heavens opened up (Acts 7:56). We first have to learn to bring our small, as well as our large problems, to God, not only in our quiet time, but also simply during the day. We must learn to walk the way to Him (3). In Col.3:1-3 it reads: “*Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God*”.

If we are able to see the problem from the perspective of Christ, we can deal with it in a better way. Then we enter into His possibilities to solve the problem or to give us strength to deal with it in a proper way. In practice it means: to pray.

Bill Hybels from Willow Creek describes his learning process of prayer in the book: *Too Busy Not to Pray* (4): “I have read 15 to 20 books about prayer and studied all texts in the Bible, as far as prayer is concerned. And then I did something totally overwhelming: “I prayed!” Many men of God have repeated the young Samuel’s prayer: Speak Lord, your servant is listening! We more than often ask God for advice in a specific situation. Lord, how should I deal with this problem with that nasty colleague, neighbor etcetera? We become aware that we find ourselves in some situations with a certain purpose. Lord, would You help me to see my friend, child, acquaintance, with your eyes? Often we find comfort and we experience rest at difficult moments in one day. Because we look with the heart of Jesus, respond like Jesus, we are able to respond with a full self-control, which is surely the fruit of His Spirit, His Heart. In our stress, which we sometimes experience together with others, it is also important to keep an open relationship with the other person through the relationally open relationship with God. Many people stop to have contact (sometimes for years) with the other person after a quarrel or aggression; they isolate themselves or flee and are no longer able to use the skills of the right brain–communication (non-verbal, emotionally enter into rest, consider the relationship more important than the problem etc.). Some strategies to remain relational are: curiosity (Gen.3:9, 11), showing appreciation, kindness and advancing a conversation. Dr. Karl Lehman (5, 6) has developed a simple check list to monitor our relational circuits.

**Context**

Checklist Relational Circuits (brief), made by Karl Lehman MD and adjusted for THRIVE and CONNEXUS training by Life Model Works.

* I just want a problem or person or emotion to disappear;
* I do not want to experience what other people feel or to listen to what other people say;
* My spirit has become ‘stuck’ on a shocking event;
* I do not want to seek contact or be associated with someone whom I used to like before;
* I just want to go away, fight or do nothing;
* I want to deal aggressively and judge others and ridicule them.

If your answer is yes to all points, your relational circuits are OFF.

**2. Behave according to who you are. From your Christian identity (7)**

Here, it is about the development of both an individual and a group identity (Body of Christ). The identity of man according to the Bible, is determined by the fact that he is a creation of God. This in contrast to the humanistic thinking in which autonomy is the guideline of the identity. That also means that *God* profoundly determines the identity of man, or (perhaps better said) the relationship in which he is engaged towards God, in accordance to the order of creation. The fact that we creatures are of God, means: dependence on God, accountability to God, obedience to God, serving God, to live according to His will and to His honor. The identity of man is originally determined by the great privilege to be knowing Him, loving Him and serving Him. After all, man has been created after God’s image. A practical day-to-day exercise to know your Christian identity, is to be found in the article ‘Weten wie je bent in het aangezicht van God’ (‘Knowing who you are in the sight of God’) (8). The identity of man created by God is found in having a joyful identity (Zephaniah 3:17) (7). In the book ‘Leven naar Gods plan’ (‘Living according to God’s plan’) (8), the different tasks that are to be learnt about natural and spiritual maturity are described in detail. Unfortunately, it cannot be completely elaborated in this article. For the group of 4-12 year-olds, the most important learning task is: to take care of themselves. In spiritual sense this learning means: to pray by themselves, to lay down their wishes before God, to develop their perseverance, to learn to discover which unique characteristics God has given them. If this is not learnt, the child will not be able to take (spiritual) responsibility for itself later when it has become an adult. From the age of 13 years until the birth of his first child, one should learn to take care of two people at the same time. Learning to develop how to take care of others. If a person has not learnt this, he will not be able to build up relationships later as an adult, where there is mutual satisfaction. After the 13th year, a person learns to create a bond with his peers and develop a group identity. People learn to contribute to the community and to feel related with it. It goes without saying that a healthy faith community may play a major role in it. With regard to the elder people, which are those who have **adult** children, the main task is: to take care of the community without expecting anything in return. If this task is not achieved, the faith communities will be characterized by a persistently decreasing spiritual maturity. An elder person appreciates every member of the community because of who he is and will guide and support the community to grow spiritually. Without a well-functioning relational circuit, people will not succeed to experience God’s presence or achieve a collective awareness where God is with us (Emmanuel). If we look at traumatic experiences in this way, we will discover that in every traumatic memory, the person is not aware of God’s active presence. This goes for all traumatic memories that are always triggered by post-traumatic stress-symptoms. In order to solve a traumatic event, one should enter into a mental condition where he is not anymore. As soon as this reality is shared with a confidential other person, we start to ask ourselves what it means to be ourselves, and what our feelings and actions are in the light of that particularly awful event. When we start to process the trauma in this way, it will first cause suffering. But instead of feeling lonesome and going back to the nasty event, we can now deal with the suffering and even accept it, and then learn from the event that is now in the past. In this relational setting we can learn from God and others who we are just as God has created us. On the condition that we, ‘our brains’, are able to experience God’s active presence in a mutual ‘mind setting’ where we feel understood by God, who shares our suffering and joy. The awareness of the mutual mind setting with God is also an acquired skill of the brains, which is best achieved by being modelled and trained by those who are aware of God’s presence. In such a way we learn to know our deepest identity, even when there is stress in our lives. Neurology and spirituality meet together and are related with one another!

**3. Enter into rest from difficult feelings. To keep the relational circuits (RC) during the six nasty feelings**

Let us assume that there are five important stages in the process and experience of feelings in the brains, which always need to be processed in the same way and order and where the process can also be blocked by every wrong step. Just compare it with a car washing program, which will for example be: a) the soaping; b) the scrubbing; c) the rinsing; d) the drying; e) the finishing of details. It is clear for everyone that the changing of the order has an impact on the final result. Just like the improvement of the scrubbing has no impact on the drying. In the same way the brains are trying to solve problems by processing emotions, relationships and events. A careful attention for the processing order will help to solve the problems.

Perhaps the most important contribution of the Life Model, is the maintaining of the order and the selection of many known interventions with regard to the functioning of the brains (10). A simple illustration of the process in the brains begins with the observation when safely attached children are getting upset and then spontaneously come into rest and comfort by themselves. Validation or truth-finding implies the accurate acknowledgement and sensing how great the problem is which is being felt. Through comfort one will notice that the problem has boundaries. From the brain perspective, it is to be seen as two functions of nervous systems: namely the association of things (what belongs to this experience?) and rightly keeping things separately, which we cannot associate together (what is not an aspect of this experience?). When a person tries to turn the order the other way around by first comforting and beginning with ‘it could have been worse’ or ‘it is not that big’, the result is an immediate resistance against comfort. But when we first accurately express the name, the size, the extent, the intensity and the importance and emotional content of an experience, we will sooner enter into rest. When the brain is not able to maintain a good relationship while experiencing sadness, anger, fear, disgust or shame, the difficult emotion will remain actively present and some of the emotions will become chronic or will be easily triggered. Then we will try to avoid certain emotions or we warn others not to arouse those emotions. For example: “You don’t want to know what will happen when I am angry”. Due to that constant ‘alarm condition’ we shall never enter into rest and become for example depressive. People will do their best to prevent shame, anger and threats. This response is so strong that the brains will no longer be able to switch back to the feeling of joy. People can no longer come into rest properly without those negative motivation. Some examples of how people think: ‘Threats are necessary to make employees work’, ‘Children will only obey when I am angry and when I yell at them’, ‘When I do not put my wife under pressure, she will never be a good wife’. However, when the skill of how to return to rest and joy is missing, the ‘motivation’ of others can enlarge their unpleasant emotions and in that way contrarily lead to a negative ‘self-fulfilling reality’. People do not realize that coming back to joy as a normal life style, will be unreachable in that way. In the article ‘Ten important skills which therapists have never learnt’ by Jim Wilder (9) you can find a detailed description about how to come back to rest from different negative emotions. We shall briefly address one of them.

**4. Returning from anger to shalom**

Most people do not consider anger to be something that improves the relationship. People also do not feel like making contact with someone who is angry. We are often exposed to anger that comes from a ‘poisonous’ motivation, due to which there is a valid sense of fear to a certain degree, about what anger can cause. There are only few people who have been confronted with a very angry person, and have not cut off their RCs and who have made efforts to improve the relationship. There are few people who have confirmed the value of the other (angry) person, which sometimes reduced the anger of this person, in order to make him process the anger and at the same time be open for him, while he is angry. As with many emotions, anger has a right brain variation and a left brain variation. The right brain variation of anger is a response to a threat which we cannot escape from (such as escaping from a lion) or a threat which we must stop, for example when someone hits our child. The left brain variation of anger is a result of a certain way of thinking which becomes worse by confirmation. “My wife is stupid and disobedient and I have to beat her before she listens to me”. When we allow/permit how angry the husband must be at his wife, we pour more fuel on the fire. That must not be recognized. The right brain anger is different and to be seen as a direct response to a situation. If this right brain anger is missing, it will give the person the feeling that something is wrong.

For example: when the neighbor is constantly molesting the children of a woman and she doesn’t get angry about it at all and after that she very calmly says: “I don’t get angry when he is molesting my children”. With this example we directly know that something essential is missing. Some people have tried to distinguish justified anger from unjustified anger, but this difference has got nothing to do with the ‘left or right’ variation of anger. When someone is angry because his children have been molested and it is recognized as a rightly permitted emotion, it will rather calm a person down. Many families, churches and enterprises use anger to motivate others (read: force) to obey their rules.

The damaging results of it are that the motivation of the other person will disappear. Punishing more harshly doesn’t improve the behavior, but manipulates. The brains are also sensitive to the feeding of an unsafe attachment if the person whom we approach for help, is the same person whom we do ‘not want to frighten’. Motivating a group and building up unity in a group, becomes more difficult as people are trying to avoid anger more and more. As with all relational skills of the brains, the return from anger to joy can only be learnt from a person who has those abilities, thus not only by words. Therefore, I am not trying to give you a training in this article. But words do help us to find people who have this skill. Just consider who you would like to have on your side and who you do not want when you’re dealing with people who are angry with you. Just consider with whom you would want to talk when you’re angry. The best person would be someone who can become angry and yet treat others kindly, so that you would prefer to record it for others who find it hard to deal with anger and play it for them to listen. There are people who have the skill to return from anger to joy. The best learning experience is when you can share your anger with such a person and can ask him how he or she would act in your place (this goes for people and God!)

**5. To enter into rest physically**

We must also learn how to bring those difficult emotions to rest physically, while we keep our relational circuits active. This has many physical consequences as well. Even remaining in a negative emotion for only six minutes, means that the stress hormone cortisol is present in our blood for 24 hours (10). In the unconscious or autonomic nervous system, the balance which is necessary between the sympathetic nervous system (Fight, Flight or Fright response) and the parasympathetic nervous system (which brings rest) gets disturbed which causes the sympathetic system to have control chronically. This causes all kinds of psychosomatic responses and complaints in the body which are empowered by the negative feelings that are chronically present. The complaints resulting from that, are often chronic fatigue, chronic muscle and joint problems, skin problems and functional disorders of the bowels, stomach and heart problems and a lot more. It is then very important to influence the balance in the vegetative nervous system positively by breathing and relaxation exercises. If this is how we react in a stressful situation, we will be able to maintain our relational circuits active by a calm diaphragmatic breathing (‘abdominal breathing’) and muscle relaxation exercises, through which we bring about a restraint of the sympathetic nervous system and in that way a reduction of complaints (11). It can be difficult for many people to do this for at least 5 minutes when they do it for the first time, and at the same time to hold on the feeling of rest and appreciation. Once we succeed, we should exercise this in the morning, at noon and in the evening for 5 minutes. Dr. Jim Wilder admits that he called this exercise principle a trivial one in the past, but nevertheless it was due to the exercise of this skill before the beginning of the trauma process, that he could eliminate the necessity of hospitalization in his practice.

**6. Learning how to suffer in a good way**

We often want to avoid suffering and escape from it in a wrong way.

In the Bible, love and suffering are inextricably connected to each other. Dr. Kurt Blatter has clearly set out in a model how we can respond to difficult feelings (12).



This model deals with negative feelings which are aroused by aggressive behavior. Negative feelings can have countless causes; in addition to physical aggression, there is passive aggression (to remain silent; breaking the RC), but also harming, injuring, insulting, denigrating, dishonoring, disabling and robbing. Consequently, that may cause three different, often automatic (unconsciously caused by brain skills) responses to those negative feelings.

* The ‘anti-aggressor’, which has been evoked in me, is focused again on the aggressor. The principle A in the figure (What you do to me, I do to you, eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth… thou shalt hate thine enemy). This leads to a far-reaching escalation of mutual aggression.
* The principle B in the figure: I break the relational circuits and focus my pent-up feelings on third parties, for example my children. Children may ask themselves for example: “What is the matter with dad, that he is so annoyed and angry with us?”
* The principle C in the figure: The ‘anti-aggressor’ that was evoked in me, is focused on me myself. This is how the above-mentioned psychosomatic problems start. Often, this also happens to sub-assertive people. This creates self-destructive tendencies and mechanisms, which causes depression or at least improve them.
* The detour via God as a biblically therapeutic solution (Principle D and 2 in the model).

**7. Testimony of Dr. K. Blatter: learn to love your enemies (Principle 2)**

The greater part of the physicians in my surroundings and further vicinity was against the plan that I had designed to start a Christian clinic in Switzerland, which practice I intended to totally build up on biblically therapeutic truths. People were using every opportunity to sabotage me. Apparently, the negative feelings of my colleagues were accumulating: during a region meeting, in which I also participated, a colleague stood up and called me the greatest ‘cult brother’ ever. My heart almost stopped beating, I was embarrassed; the insult and hatred of these fellow physicians had a direct impact on my organs. I immediately felt an awful inner distress; at the same time I felt a pain in my breast as if a knife was stung in it. My mucous membrane felt awfully dry and in the area of my larynx everything was in such a tense that I noted that I had no control anymore over my voice. My first thought was namely: “I will make him pay for it!”

Besides, I knew some negative events from his life. I wanted to respond immediately to it. However, the described physical symptoms fortunately served as a warning signal. At the same time I recognized the course of my aggressive act, which was ignited by the aggression of others (Principle 1). I also knew the therapeutic resource from Matthew 5:44 (Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you). The moment that my voice definitely forsook me, I put the “but …, yet …, nevertheless …, of the faith” into operation and cried out to God, just like Peter did, when he was at risk of sinking. Inwardly I got strengthened, after all my power seemed to be disappearing. I started with a quiet prayer for the aggressor and blessed him in the name of the Lord. In that way, as far as I am concerned, the case was solved and I could even eat my meal, which followed thereafter. The next few days, something that I already knew, became a new experience to me. Whenever I heard the word ‘cult brother’ in my inner man and the same scene takes place before my inner eyes, my heart started to beat faster. My stomach became so tense that I lost my appetite and felt so uncomfortable and bloated after the meal, whereby my stomach ached.

It was a typically psychosomatic pattern after a psychological injury, and I again had symptoms, which served as warnings (principle C). During those moments I started to pray again for that particular colleague; I experienced that my hatred towards him changed into compassion for his situation and my attitude towards him, gradually became loving….

Principle 2 in the model (according to Mat.5:44) started to become effective in my inner man. I no longer had any difficulty with meeting this colleague and the Lord had arranged three encounters with him hereafter. The first encounter took place about one and a half year after the awful event. I travelled from Langenthal to Saint Gallen, where I was planning to give a lecture. On the station platform, that particular colleague was waiting for the train. I had no idea which direction he was going to, nor which class. Therefore I prayed: “Lord, could you make this colleague to travel first class to Zürich” (I was travelling first class because I wanted to reread my lecture). I settled myself first in a compartment. The colleague actually came to sit next to me and during the journey a conversation about God, the world and Christ had developed, according to his wish. The second encounter took place in the train again. This time I travelled second class in the opposite direction to Bern. The colleague was also on the platform and my prayer was: “Lord, could you arrange that my colleague will travel in the same direction and in the second class?” Again he entered into the same compartment as l did. Again he asked questions about the faith, Christ and God. A third encounter followed in front of the cemetery. It was 24th December and I wanted to bring flowers and candles to the grave of our daughter who had just passed away. At the gate I developed a conversation with that colleague, who had been living in a new house in that neighborhood. He wanted to know why I was visiting the cemetery. When I told him about our daughter, he started to cry. “Ohh, you know”, he said, “I also have buried my daughter here. She died when she was twenty”. So, there we stood, in the cold evening light and we cried together. On Christmas Day I wrote him a letter, in which I cited the following verse: “Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ”. My colleague answered it with a nice brief letter. Conclusion: If I had paid attention to my natural behavior, namely my attitude against this ‘enemy’ and had fought against the injustice that I had suffered, then these encounters would had never taken place. Compare “heap coals of fire’ (Proverbs 25:22, Romans 12:20). Coals of fire means a beneficial irritation, which may cause one to consider his own course of action.

**8. The response of Jesus to aggression**

In the development and the course of aggression, with the inner peace as an absolute measurement, the entering into rest from a difficult emotion, plays an important role. Self-destructive mechanisms always go hand in hand with very intense internal discomfort. This also causes psychosomatic disorders in the organism in its whole. It is similar to an enormous tension in the inner man which uses a lot of energy. Jesus has also laid a therapeutic basis by saying: “Learn from Me, for I am meek and lowly in the heart and you shall find rest for your soul” and in 1 Peter 2: 23 it reads: “But kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously” (compare this to the detour via God). The judgment of Jesus in the Court of the High priest is a living testimony (Mat.26:57-69).

If you analyze this passage, you discover that there is mention of a lot of aggression towards Jesus. They seized Him; they tried to find false testimony against Jesus so they could kill Him. Many false witnesses came to see for themselves. They found nothing. Finally two people stood up. They spoke. The high priest stood up. And the high priest answered and said unto him, I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God.” Jesus answered: “Thou hast said.” Then the high priest rent his clothes, saying, Behold, now ye have heard his blasphemy. What think ye? They answered and said, He is guilty of death. Then did they spit in his face, and buffeted him; and others smote him with the palms of their hands, Saying, Prophesy unto us, thou Christ, Who is he that smote thee?” In the midst of this hostile action with a clear purpose, namely to get rid of this burdensome Jesus of Nazareth, the remarkable words about Christ are written: But He remained silent. If the word silent would have referred to the fact that Jesus kept silent, it would have been a linguistic doubling (Hendiadys). This was not God’s intention; Here, God’s Word intends to point us, especially at a psychological aspect of the inner man. Jesus kept silent but at the same time he inwardly remained fully calm. He was inwardly also immune towards the staggering aggressive deeds and accusations of the court. Even at the cross, while He suffered as no man ever had. He could not be tempted to respond with an opposite aggression or cursing his enemies, but He said: “Father, forgive them”. A perfect response which remained faithful unto His perfect identity. The healing of the inner man is always related to contact with God and an inner peace caused by Him, which is made possible through Matthew 5: 44 (Psalm 109:4, Psalm 62:9, 1 Peter 2:23).

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Notes:

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