Chapter 18

Brain Gym and Relief from Stress, Distress, and Trauma

Stressful situations arise in everyone's life: from traffic jams and difficult colleagues to financial challenges, separation or divorce, and illness. Stress arises in children's lives as well, through failure in school, peer issues, family disruptions, or other conflicts. When such stresses are ongoing, they may evolve into *distress*, which could be defined as suffering caused by grief, anxiety, or unhappiness. Distress over time, or with sudden impact, may result in *trauma*: severe emotional shock, often with long-lasting psychological effects.

As a Brain Gym® consultant, I have worked with many clients who have described traumas of one kind or another, often a vivid event or period of time that significantly changed how they lived their lives. In this chapter, we'll look at the subject of trauma more specifically, exploring how it registers in the body and how Brain Gym movements and processes help provide relief from it.

The effects of trauma

Our reaction to an event is determined solely by the meaning it holds for us. The death of a grandparent, for example, may have little impact on one child but be devastating to her sibling. Events that look inconsequential to an outside observer can have deep and damaging effects on the person involved. For example, a sarcastic comment to a sensitive child, meant to be humorous, could profoundly affect him for years to come.

Some distressing experiences (perhaps those that are minor in nature) may truly be healed by time. Some we think are resolved,

Please note: While many people experience relief from stress, distress, and trauma as a result of the goals they balance for, the Brain Gym®/Edu-K program is educational in nature and not therapy; it is not a substitute for appropriate medical treatment. Anyone experiencing extreme symptoms should seek help from a professional who offers specialized trauma-recovery services.

but they're only hiding as we create and refine techniques for burying or ignoring them. Putting our emotional reactions on hold is actually a very important short-term coping strategy: it allows us to do what must be done in the moment. But the temptation is strong never to return to finish our healing process.

"Forgotten" or simply unrecognized trauma can be at the root of many of our conditioned responses. For example, I became surprisingly emotional when doing life insurance and estate planning with my husband; then I realized that this topic was touching strongly on a childhood memory from more than forty years prior: the shock of my father's sudden death when I was eleven years old, and the challenges my family experienced afterward. It's important to recognize trauma in our life for what it is, or was, and address it consciously, at the right time.

Calling on Brain Gym

September 11, 2001, was a day of devastating terrorist strikes in the United States. I was in Germany, enjoying the last afternoon of a course that followed the 2001 Brain Gym® International Conference, at the moment we heard the news.

We were shocked, confused, upset—and had only the sketchiest details. In class, we instinctively began using Hook-ups, the Positive Points, and other Brain Gym processes as we supported each other. Brain Gym tools may seem so simple, but as we shared them, a spirit of calm began to fill the room. The confusion and grief were still there, but the tremendous sense of anxiety and shock slowly began to diminish.

When class ended, I returned to my hotel room. My husband had arrived just the day before, to join me for a post-conference travel holiday, and together we saw it all on television: the awful destruction. Thousands dead. My heart ached as the impact of the day's events sank in.

I was grateful that I had Brain Gym movements and Edu-K balancing to fall back on. Every time I felt overwhelmed by what was happening, I'd go through the PACE process, often concluding by sitting in Hook-ups for perhaps fifteen minutes or more. I'd feel tension slowly release and a more relaxed state begin to return; I'd feel my thoughts calm down and emotional numbness abate as my breathing deepened and the awareness of my own heart increased. Sometimes I'd lead myself through an entire Brain Gym balance with the goal of being in the present moment: "I am here, now, and I am safe."

The travel that my husband and I managed to do seemed quite surreal: driving through vineyards and touring castles, knowing that the wreckage of the World Trade Center was still smoldering back home. The fantasy of visiting exotic places, juxtaposed with the reality of world events, became an emotional roller coaster.

Finally, the airlines were operating again, and we were on a flight from Germany to New York. Distress and pain were all around, in the faces of airline employees and fellow travelers. It was a palpable force in the very air of that flight.

I kept calling on my Brain Gym tools to relieve the stress of the moment and return to as balanced a state as was possible: doing PACE as I waited in the airport, Hook-ups and Positive Points in my seat on the airplane, and other movements as I stood to stretch during the flight. I did them *all*.

I was relieved to finally be home, but then was faced with the incessant media coverage of ongoing events. Everywhere I turned, news reports refreshed the trauma in my mind-body system. I turned again and again to my Brain Gym tools. It's not that Brain Gym made my days easy or comfortable; as for everyone, it was truly a time of shock and mourning. But I was grateful for the way it allowed me to deal with the emotions that came up and remain as clear as possible.

Moving out of trauma

As we have discussed throughout this book, we are most at ease when our main brain structures are able to share information with one another. But under stress, our mind-body system automatically prepares for self-preservation: less vital resources are switched off and energy is routed to the brain stem. Access to formal reasoning vanishes and we become hyper-alert, our nerves on edge.

The strong emotional component provided by the limbic system bonds to the memory of where we are and what we are doing at the time of a traumatic event. The entire picture of this moment becomes vividly established in our body's memory, ready to emerge when we're reminded of the situation. This process is intended to protect us, so we can avoid repeating the injury. The challenge comes when the pattern outlives its usefulness, and we are left with an automatic stress response that no longer serves us.

When we are faced with a stress reaction and call on Brain Gym movements or Edu-K balancing, we help our mind-body system return to a state of greater ease. Taking time to deeply notice these changes reinforces our awareness that a new, integrated pattern has been established. If the emotion resurfaces, we can address it again with Brain Gym movements or balancing. Eventually, our impulse to return to the old, un-integrated pattern begins to fade.

Sharing tools that help

About six weeks after September 11, I was at a conference where many of the participants were from New York City. Over lunch on the first day, a few of us began talking about where we had been at the time of the

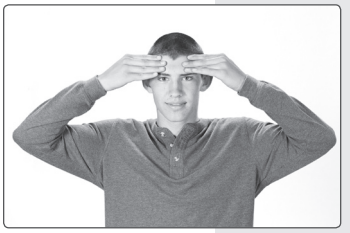
terrorist attack. One Manhattan resident spoke of her apartment being enveloped by the billowing, choking dust; another described hearing the awful sounds of disaster: screams, sirens, and more. One had lost a dear friend in the buildings' collapse. Many talked of the emotional toll from watching the nonstop news coverage.

One person now couldn't sleep; another kept feeling a continual knot in his stomach. Our conversation brought up the pain that I was still carrying about this event. A familiar grief crept back into my heart and my muscles tightened: I had vividly "called up" the trauma pattern that became established that awful day.

Hook-ups Part I

Hook-ups Part II

At the height of our conversation, I found myself leading everyone into Hook-ups and then Positive Points. We all became quite still. Before long, I heard the sounds of deeper breathing in those around me and noticed that I was breathing more deeply, as well. Shoulders gently dropped as everyone began to release long-held tension. Furrows on foreheads began to soften as faces relaxed, and I noticed that my own thoughts had slowed down. I could now feel my heart beating, and it felt soft, yet strong and available. Looking around, it was clear to me that a significant shift had occurred.



The Positive Points

At this point, I suggested that everyone think again about the events of September 11. It took some time for people to speak. One woman finally shared, "I can remember what happened that day, but it's more distant. It's like it was much longer ago." Another person said, "I can think about it and still breathe. This is different." A third said, "I keep looking around inside for that sharp pain, and it's just not there. I don't get it."

The next day the "sleepless" woman shared that she had actually slept through the night. "I lay down and just drifted right off to sleep. I feel rested for the first time in weeks." Another person reported he wasn't "carrying such a heavy burden anymore." Everyone shared that they were experiencing a positive change. One man had actually called his wife and described Hook-ups over the phone so she could use it herself and share it with their children. Several people reported how much it helped to use Brain Gym when the old feelings came up again (as they will do).

Severe post-traumatic stress should be treated appropriately. Depending on the individual and the circumstance, this could include a combination of psychotherapy and Brain Gym sessions or other interventions as well. But you may find that Brain Gym techniques alone are very helpful in profoundly reducing the immediate effects of trauma.

Clearly, the events of September 11 were extraordinary, and nothing is a "magic fix." We talked about how trauma affects us on many levels and that we may need to address it over time, through whatever modalities work best for each of us.

If my telling of this story about September 11 has brought up unpleasant memories for you, you might like to experience these same Brain Gym movements now.

▸ Notice first how you feel when you recall the events of that day. Then, gently move into Hook-ups. Become aware of anything shifting or releasing: your level of muscle tension, depth of breathing, whatever presents itself to be noticed. At some point, you may feel ready to move to Part Two of Hook-ups. After a while, bring your fingertips to your forehead and gently hold your Positive Points. What do you notice now when you recall the events of that day? You can repeat this process as often as you like.

Sometimes, just these few movements can make a significant difference.

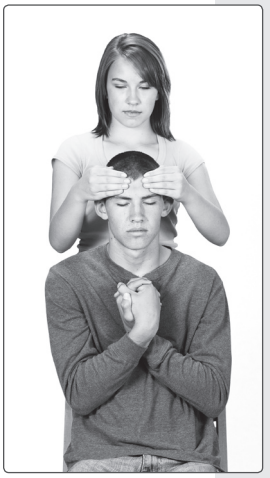
An organic intervention

A teacher I know quite well is trained in Brain Gym. On the morning of September 11, just after the news of the attacks had been announced in her school, she went to as many classrooms as she could and spoke about what had occurred. Many children talked about how upset and fearful they were. Then this teacher led the children in Hook-ups and Positive Points. In every class she visited, the children said they felt a lot better after doing this. One boy said, "I was really scared. But my tummy settled right down." The teacher encouraged the students to use these Brain Gym movements any time they wanted to, and to teach their family members what they'd learned.

I believe there would be less residual stress stored in our bodies if we used techniques like these as soon as possible after any traumatic event. Doing something helpful doesn't take much; this teacher spent perhaps fifteen minutes in each classroom. I can only imagine what the benefit would have been if every teacher in that school (in our city? in our country?) had known about these simple techniques and used them right away with his or her class, and from time to time after that, when discussing this horrifying day. We can't foresee all the challenging experiences that life may hold for us, but by addressing trauma promptly with effective tools, we can diminish the impact on our mind-body system.

Tools for everyday use

Most of us will (fortunately) never directly experience the kinds of devastating events described above. However, stress, distress, and trauma come in all shapes and sizes, from being sorely embarrassed, to failing in math again and again, to being injured in a fall. How reassuring to have something so simple and effective to use in times of need!



Hook-ups and
The Positive Points

I walked into the locker room at my gym and found an elderly woman holding icepacks on her cheekbone and knee. She'd slipped on a puddle as she returned from her water-exercise class. Falling holds real terror for elderly people, considering how fragile their bones may be. This woman's eyes were wide open and she was trembling, despite her claims of "I'm fine. . . . " I introduced myself and told her I might be able to help her feel better soon with a couple of quick techniques, to which she agreed. While she sat in Hook-ups, I held her Positive Points.

After just a few moments, I felt her almost melt under my hands as the tension drained out of her; her rigid body relaxed and she slumped against the back of her chair. She looked up and said, "I really do feel a lot better! How did you do that?" I showed her again how to sit in Hook-ups and where her Positive Points were so she could do these movements at home, and I went on my way.

We resolve trauma a bit at a time. And, I believe, when we address it immediately, the simplest of actions can bring powerful resolution. Hook-ups and the Positive Points: I invite all of you to use these tools and share them with others, whether dealing with trauma or just the stresses of daily life.

This selection is Chapter 18 of the book *Educate Your Brain: Use mind-body balance to learn faster, work smarter, and move more easily through life*, which introduces and illustrates many of the concepts that comprise the practices and philosophy of the Brain Gym® program. It was written by Kathy Brown, M.Ed., and published by Balance Point Publishing LLC, ©Copyright 2012.

What follows is an Addendum containing two additional stories about the use of Brain Gym techniques to address trauma. At the time of printing *Educate Your Brain*, much editing needed to occur to keep the chapters a manageable length, and these stories were removed. The author includes them here to make this PDF resource more helpful. This Addendum is ©Copyright Kathy Brown, M.Ed., 2013.

Chapter 18 ~ Addendum

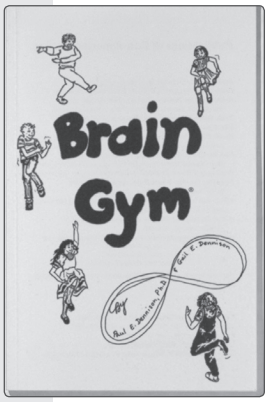
Healing from the inside out

Here is the story of how a professional trauma specialist found the simple Brain Gym movements to be amazingly effective in a different circumstance.

In 1989 Svetlana Masgutova, Ph.D., then head of Ascension Institute of Psychology in Orechova-Zoueva, Russia, began supervising emergency therapy services for the scores of traumatized and badly burned children who had survived one of the most tragic train accidents ever to occur. Sparks from two trains had ignited fumes that spread for miles from a massive natural gas pipeline leak. Hundreds of passengers died instantly, as the fireball explosion charred all trees within a three-mile radius, and broke windows seven miles away.

Skilled in managing disaster recovery (she had previously organized and trained psychological recovery teams for Chernobyl and other disaster sites) Svetlana found that her existing techniques were simply not sufficient to help the children process and release the magnitude of the trauma they had experienced: the sights and sounds of exploding train cars, death of parents and siblings, burning bodies. She says these children were "stuck in the brain stem freeze-or-flight response," and had "no perspective on how to survive." After three months, over half the nearly 400 badly burned children had died; the rest were symptomatically depressed, and continued to draw only dark, horrifying pictures of the accident in their art therapy sessions.

It was at this point that Svetlana came across the "little orange Brain Gym® book,"[1] the small volume containing Paul and Gail Dennison's initial description of the 26 Brain Gym movements, illustrated with Gail's drawings. It had been left in Russia by Carla Hannaford, Ph.D., after she taught a basic Brain Gym course there in 1988, through the Association of Humanistic Psychologists (AHP) Soviet Project. Svetlana's intuition prompted her to explore these Brain Gym movements with the traumatized children.



The "little orange Brain Gym book"

She found that using Brain Gym movements created a "safe space" for the children before the therapists did memory release work with them. It had a remarkable effect. Initially the children had drawn horrifying scenes of the disaster, in only red and black, but within a few weeks they began depicting the fire as smaller and smaller in their artwork. Soon they began drawing in brighter colors, and then rendering cheerful images such as butterflies, rainbows, and people running through meadows. The children began healing physically, and their emotional state became much more positive. The experts onsite

Svetlana Masgotova eventually became fully trained in the Brain Gym® and Educational Kinesiology programs, and began teaching others. Psychologists and doctors in major cities throughout Russia are now using these tools very successfully with people of all ages, to address all kinds of issues. Svetlana continues her research on the many uses of Edu-K, especially in relation to infant reflex development. She is now a member of the Edu-K International Faculty and is a highly regarded presenter at its international conferences.

recognized that these children had recovered much faster than those in other facilities, who had not experienced Brain Gym movements as part of their therapy.

The entire story of this incident is told in the compelling *Trauma Recovery: You Are A Winner – A New Choice Through Natural Developmental Movements*, by Masgutova and Curlee. Svetlana writes, "Being a scientist, I promised myself that I would set up in-depth studies of the phenomena resulting from these exercises because I knew of nothing else that could take children so quickly from a past tragedy into present reality." [2]

Tsunami trauma recovery

More recently, Brain Gym consultants Tan Li-Anne of Singapore and Henry Remanly of Indonesia offered trauma recovery support in their own region. They went to the towns of Medan and Banda Aceh, where the devastating tsunami of December 26, 2004 killed many thousands of people and washed away entire villages, leaving survivors with shocked and shattered lives.

They worked through an Indonesian non-governmental organization called *Aceh Sepakat*, which roughly translates to Aceh Unity. In fact, this was the first agency to arrive in Aceh, even before the government. "Since Henry Remanly and I are Edu-K and Touch for Health Instructors, we believed we had valuable skills to support the survivors—we just wanted to be where people needed us," Li-Anne says. She and Henry, separately and together, made four trips to Indonesia overall. On their fourth they were joined by Edu-K instructor Moira Dempsey of Australia (formerly of Singapore), who had been providing logistical and financial support all along. Li-Anne goes on to describe their work:

Our goals were simply to:

- Help large groups of survivors clear phobias and trauma surrounding the tsunami
- Give clients tools to manage their own trauma and stress independent of us
- Develop client competence and confidence so they could return to their families and communities to share newfound skills—creating a trauma clearing ripple effect[3]

For this, they developed a specific, abbreviated learning menu of eight Brain Gym activities, plus tools from Gary Craig's Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT) program, which they shared through numerous self-help classes in refugee camps (some scheduled, many spontaneous).

They also worked individually with traumatized survivors. One woman, after being carried away by waves over two stories high, was now terrified

of heights. Another kept hallucinating that she was still in the tsunami. A surprising number now experienced knee problems (despite no direct knee injury), as well as difficulty standing and sitting. Many others reported symptoms such as insomnia, hyper-vigilance, fear of water, dizzy spells, psychosomatic pains, and obsession over all they had lost. Li-Anne reports, "More than 90 percent of the time, those who completed the course reported that they had their first good night of sleep after their class. One hundred percent of participants reported a 50 to 90 percent reduction of anxiety."[5]

Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT) is an "emotional version of acupuncture wherein we stimulate certain meridian points by tapping on them with our fingertips" while repeating specific affirmative statements.[4]

In June of 2006 Li-Anne and Henry took an amended version of this program to Jogjakarta, on the Indonesian island of Java, where they worked with the survivors of the earthquake there, who also expected imminent eruption of nearby Mount Merapi. In 2005 Li-Anne and Henry received the Educational Kinesiology Foundation Award for Humanitarianism for their work in Aceh.

Profound possibilities

I am incredibly grateful for these amazing Brain Gym tools, through which so many people have regained a sense of safety, and of self, as the inner effects of distress fall away.

What is it about these simple movements, that they can have such a profoundly healing effect? Time may tell. And, I love knowing that it doesn't really matter. I can't image that the traumatized children in Russia, or tsunami survivors in Indonesia, cared if there was a scientific explanation. They needed support, and it arrived in the form of simple movements that released the hold that trauma had on them, allowing them to heal from the inside out.

1 Dennison, Paul E. and Gail E. Dennison. *Brain Gym®: Simple Activities for Whole-Brain Learning*. Ventura, CA: Edu-Kinesthetics, Inc., 1986.

2 Masgutova, Svetlana, and Pamela Curlee. *Trauma Recovery: You Are A Winner—A New Choice Through Natural Developmental Movements*. Iowa: 1st World Publishing, 2007. 54.

3 Tan, Li-Anne. "Moving Beyond Survival: Living After Trauma, A Teaching and Learning Menu." *2006 International Brain Gym®/Edu-K Conference Manual*. Brisbane, Australia: Brain Gym®Edu-K Network, Inc. (Aust). 67.

4 *World Center for EFT* Web site: http://www.emofree.com/newcomer.htm. Retrieved October 15, 2009.

5 Tan, Li-Anne. "Moving Beyond Survival: Living After Trauma, A Teaching and Learning Menu." *2006 International Brain Gym®/Edu-K Conference Manual*. Brisbane, Australia: Brain Gym®Edu-K Network, Inc. (Aust). 68.

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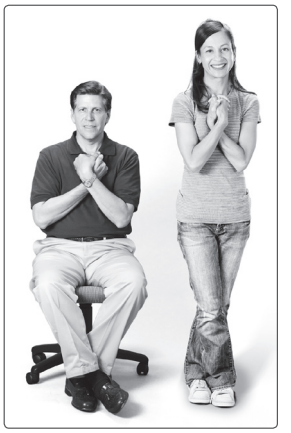
Two Brain Gym® Movements for Stress Release

Hook-ups

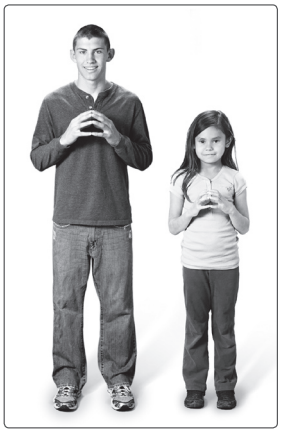
Part I: Cross your ankles. Hold your hands out in front of you, thumbs down. Cross your wrists so you could pat your hands together. Gently interlace your fingers. Bend your elbows and rotate your hands down and in toward your body, bringing them up to rest against your chest. If you like, you can lightly touch your tongue to the roof of your mouth just behind your teeth when you inhale and let your tongue relax when you exhale. Sit like this for a minute or two as you breathe deeply.



Hook-ups Part I

Part II: Uncross your ankles and wrists and touch the fingertips of your right and left hands together. Continue to touch your tongue to the roof of your mouth (relaxing it on the exhalation) as you breathe deeply for another minute or so.

When under stress, the body routes blood away from the core and to the extremities, to prepare for "fight or flight." The Dennisons hypothesize that crossing arms and legs over the midline brings attention back to the core and releases that hyper-arousal response. After Hook-ups, people frequently report deeper breathing, a greater feeling of calmness and grounding, and enhanced access to higher-order thinking skills such as choice-making. Doing Hook-ups while standing provides additional benefit by activating the vestibular system and balance-related muscles, which may help to restore equilibrium following physical, emotional, or environmental stress.[1]



Hook-ups Part II

The Positive Points

Gently place your fingertips on your forehead about halfway between eyebrows and hairline, directly above either eye. These points are on the "frontal eminence" or "brow ridge" of the skull. (In some people, this ridge is more pronounced; in others, it's quite subtle.) You can use both hands or cover both points with one hand. Allow your fingers to simply rest on these spots with an ultra-light touch for a minute or so (or longer).

The Positive Points

After holding these points, people often notice greater access to "executive functions," such as planning, choosing, and initiating positive social behavior, as well as diminished fight-or-flight hyper-arousal response, which suggests that this movement may stimulate the prefrontal cortex.[2]

1 Dennison, Paul E. and Gail E. Dennison. *The Brain Gym® Teacher's Edition*. 68-69.

2 Ibid. 70-71.

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