



by Dr. Kerstin Liesefeld



TENSION – ON THE WAY TO JOY OR LISTLESSNESS!

The concept of 'tension' used in this edition refers less to classical personality dispositions or stress responses than to a higher cognitive skill acquired in the course of life that is required, in particular, for brain functions such as strategic and analytical thinking, prioritizing, focusing, concentration and general sequential processing.



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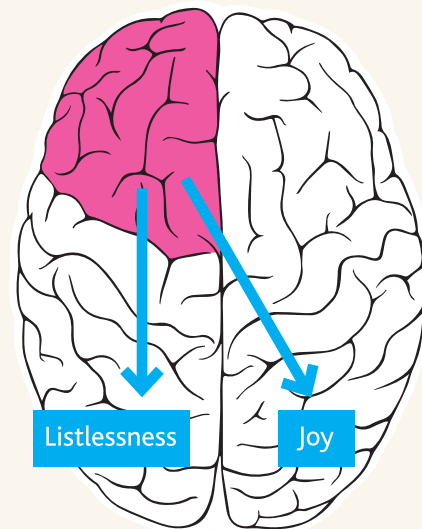
We understand tension as a physiological state that is especially required for the reception of new knowledge or information and supports functions such as restricting the radius of attention and restraining impulses to act. Therefore, it involves a progressive control mode (top-down control) and thus a brain function that is described in the model theory of action control (more under [www.excellence-in-mind.com/teaching model](http://www.excellence-in-mind.com/teaching_model)) as the intention memory or logical thinking with an affect modality of reduced positive affect.

If we assume that the interaction between our two brain hemispheres functions via the exchange of neurotransmitters and hormones, the corresponding constellations of these messengers will be shown in our moods. The involvement of higher cognitive systems in emotion control is facilitated by messengers like serotonin, which have an 'emotion-cooling' and hence soothing effect. Among other things, these messengers mediate the ability to inhibit spontaneous and possibly 'over-heated' search or avoidance responses and replace them with a cross-context control mode. In this mode we have the time and composure to be able to choose appropriate strategies or behavioural options out of an overview before an ensuing action activation comes about.

The special characteristic of the cerebral area working under tension is its 'restriction competence', i.e. the ability autonomously to fade out stimuli that might disturb the respective analysis or preparation for action and to limit attention to a narrow perspective. This function requires a conscious form of control, i.e. the inhibiting and restraining of positive, action-guiding emotions for the entire period of analysis and target orientation.

The purpose of being able to inhibit rash action impulses for a lengthy period of time is undoubtedly that it constitutes a more mature potential to cope with demanding and complex tasks.

The following excerpt from the model of action control will refer to the interactive axis between the sequential and analyzing processing function and the parallel and holistic, action-activating function, for which the inhibition of the positive affect must be suspended.



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is the description of a healthily functioning inhibition and inhibition-suspending system between analytical functions and action-guiding functions. In a balanced process, a highly cognitive tension is only maintained until the analysis and planning as well as a prioritization of potential action measures have been completed. The orientation towards the positive affect again demands a form of internal control, i.e. the suspension of the inhibition, which is no longer beneficial at the moment when all the necessary individual steps have been figured out. An example of this might be holiday planning, which at least in most cases (-) is associated with positive affects. The idea alone of going on holiday, which necessitates a certain amount of prepara-

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tion, does not seem purposeful. So, our internal control system ensures that our positive emotions are contained to a certain degree, until we have sufficient attention focus to organize and handle all the requisite preparatory measures. So, we start planning and often that can be very strenuous because of the various detailed aspects to be taken into consideration and put into a meaningful sequence. - Now, we have done it, the bags are all packed, and we have the tickets in our hands and, AT LAST, the tension drops and we can 'look forward' to what is coming.

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describes an imbalanced interaction between the inhibition of positive emotions and the so vital inhibition-suspension function. At this point, besides the 'top-down' control competences described above, we will devote ourselves to the so-called 'bottom-up' control competences. Bottom-up control occurs, for instance, through feelings or emotions that seem of relevance within cognitive attention processes, such as alarm signals indicating a danger to part or even the entirety of a desired action. Let us stay with the above example of a holiday plan.

When does pleasant anticipation not occur? This happens, for instance, when we notice, we are at the airport and a ticket is missing or a suitcase has gone lost etc. Depending on the gravity and intensity of a possible hitch, pleasant anticipation is either deferred or it dissipates completely. This is strongly dependent on the general inclination towards balance in alternating affects, but also on repeated experiences in the past.

We speak about 'acquired' tension, when the control function to suspend the inhibition of positive emotions recurrently malfunctions, so that a rather objective and sober mood is foregrounded up to the point of listlessness. A possible cause is that a form of affect confounding was conditioned that, when a specific affect is set off, activates another affect at the same time. This occurs, for instance, with tension, when it has been sufficiently experienced that first caregivers frequently responded to negative affect (e.g. sadness, anger or anxiety) with severity, harshness or tension. If one of the two affects is activated, i.e. subdued positive affect with tension or negative affect with sadness or anxiety, the other affect will be activated at the same time. In practice, this may imply that, during an analysis or planning period, as soon as a discrepancy appears that releases negative affect, the cerebral area for tension or the inhibition of positive affect is co-activated, so that the discrepancy sets off a further inhibition to action. It will be thoroughly comprehensible that in the case of increasing and demanding work stress, for which sequential networks are required, such a form of 'twin inhibition' may also lead to permanent listlessness.

WHAT SHOULD BE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT IN TEACHING, COACHING OR THERAPY?

The longer people have learnt to maintain states of tension, the more letting go will seem emotionally alien and sometimes even menacing. So, the maxim applies to take small steps to form new experiences.

For the teacher, coach or therapist:

- As in all learning and coaching processes, it is meaningful to pick up the student / client just where he is: under tension and thus in sequential processing mode.
- To begin with, an explanation of the above-mentioned relations between tension and positive emotions as well as the possible emotional confounding of past experiences (these may be of a private or professional nature and sometimes provide a good reflection of acquired stress behaviour!).
- Carry out motoric exercises on emotional switching together and please start with the exercise 'homolateral co-ordination'. In this exercise, the student / client is standing and places first his right hand on his right, slightly drawn thigh, then switches to his left hand, which is also placed on his left, slightly drawn thigh. This exercise is repeated 6-8 times, so that both sides of the body are activated at least three times.
- Immediately afterwards, this exercise is modified into the 'cross-over' co-ordination exercise, in which this time the hands both cross over to touch the slightly drawn thighs, i.e. right hand on the left thigh and then left hand on the right thigh. Further co-ordination exercises such as drawing eights prone or crossing arms and legs etc. are helpful.
- For highly tense dispositions, a good mix of ratio and emotion is essential, for tension can only be relieved gradually, which necessitates trust and a stable and structured framework.

For the person being trained or coached:

As conditioned or even temporarily strong tension is a state the brain on frequent use sometimes permanently retains as a functional pattern, it is important regularly to perform tension-relieving interventions on one's own. These include:

- Deep, conscious breathing (which becomes shallow under tension)
- The above-mentioned brain functional co-ordination exercises and techniques (for further techniques, see appendix)
- All forms of relaxation exercises such as progressive muscle relaxation, autogenic training, meditation
- Action-activating motoric activities (cycling, jogging, dancing, swimming etc.)
- Intuitive activities such as 'gaming', improvising, having fun with friends and close persons.

Tension is an essential sub-competence in a fully functioning personality. It helps us to provide projects with action plans and it enables us to acquire patience and attain higher and complex goals. But if tension becomes an aim in itself, it will permanently cause a shortage of oxygen as a result of too shallow breathing, intellectual and mental narrowness and an absence of emotional congruence and, above all, it will rob us of the joy that so enriches life.

Enjoy yourself and let go.
Warm regards!

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