



Oakland's grass greener

A flock of Canada geese found the grass greener and tastier at the Oakland County Service Center lawn on Telegraph Road in Pontiac. That's the board of commissioners' auditorium and courthouse in background. Geese love grass as well as water plants. Once extremely shy about having people near by, honkers have adapted to crowds in recent years. (Staff photo)

Biofeedback relieves ills caused by tension

A University of Michigan psychiatrist is teaching patients to cure themselves of the effects of anxiety illness by "revolving" against the disease by taking over control of their own bodies.

This overthrow of stress control, reported by Dr. Wieher H. Van Houten does not emphasize psychotherapy or drugs, but instead employs biofeedback techniques at the University Hospital Psycho-Physiology Clinic.

A high degree of success has been achieved with a growing list of psychosomatic illnesses: hives, alcoholism, migraine, hypertension, difficulties in swallowing, chronic pain, severe anxiety, phobias, insomnia, "wry neck" and partial paralysis.

So far more than 100 persons have been treated over the past two years by biofeedback, according to Dr. Van Houten, who heads the Psycho-Physiology Clinic and is chief of the U-M Adult Outpatient Psychiatry Service.

He believes an even wider range of stress illness could respond to his treatment.

He explained that instead of the doctor giving and the patient receiving treatment, the clinic's method involves teaching and encouraging the patient to become an active participant in his own care. The patient is taught to utilize the body's own ability to turn off pain and turn down anxiety "instead of remaining the helpless victim of the dictates of his disease."

"NO MATTER HOW bad the condition, the patient can be helped to do something 'for himself,'" the psychiatrist said.

The key is teaching patients to achieve complete relaxation—at will. "This is very important because anxiety and relaxation are mutually exclusive. You cannot be completely relaxed and feel anxious, worried or tense at the same time," Van Houten said.

Since these patients don't know how

to relax, they also don't know when they have achieved a state of relaxation, the physician added.

Biofeedback monitors therefore are used to tell the patient by means of an audible tone when he or she has achieved relaxation as detected by forehead muscle tension, temperature in the fingers, perspiration and alpha brain waves.

The forehead and finger sensors are used most often, Van Houten said, because they are the best indicators of overall body tension.

Good results have been achieved with migraine headache patients by teaching them to relax their body and to raise the temperature of their fingers, Van Houten said. "When the hands become warm, the headache often goes away," he noted, "because the pressure on brain blood vessels is reduced as arteries and capillaries elsewhere relax and expand."

ONE PATIENT had a severe case of hives which appeared at the same times each day. "All he had to do was look at his watch and if it was 'the' time, he broke out," Van Houten said. When the patient was taught to relax before the attacks, the hives stopped appearing.

Another patient suffered from torticollis or "wry neck." The chronic spasm of the neck muscles so severe that, most of the time, he walked around with his head so far to one side that his left ear almost touched his shoulder blade. After learning to relax his whole body, the patient found he could loosen his neck muscles and pull his head erect.

According to Van Houten, the very feeling of relaxation is completely foreign to most over-tense patients. After learning how to relax, he said, they describe a sensation of "floating out of the chair," "a loss of feeling in their hands or legs," and, often, a euphoric high.

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