

From dilemma to decision: Autogenic training with a helping professional recovering from alcohol use disorder*

A dilemmától a döntésig: Autogén tréning egy alkoholhasználat zavarból felépülő segítő szakemberrel

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Abstract

Autogenic training (AT) is an evidence-based relaxation method, effectively reducing tension, stress, and anxiety. The method can be used to reduce occupational stress and prevent burnout among helping professionals, whose work is often emotionally demanding.

This article uses interpretive case study as a method to demonstrate the use of AT for this purpose. It combines detailed phenomenological descriptions with practical reflections to provide an in-depth account of the process of autogenic training with a helping professional, an expert by experience in stable recovery from alcohol use disorder. The study illustrates how regular AT practice enhances the self-awareness of a practitioner who already possesses well-developed self-reflective skills, while also demonstrating how the method contributes to positive changes in both one's professional and private life.

Keywords: autogenic training, AT, helping professional, alcohol use disorder, recovering addict

Absztrakt

Az autogén tréning (AT) bizonyítottan hatékony relaxációs módszer, amellyel csökkenthető a feszültség, stressz és szorongás. A módszer a gyakran megterhelő munkát végző segítő szakembereket érő stressz csökkentésére, kiegészük megelőzésére is alkalmazható.

A tanulmány az interpretív esettanulmány módszerét használva mutatja be az AT alkalmazásának előnyeit. A kutatási módszer ötvözi a részletes fenomenológiai leírásokat a gyakorlati reflexiókkal. Részletes betekintést nyújt egy alkoholhasználat zavarból tartós felépülésben lévő tapasztalati szakértővel, egyben képzett segítő szakemberrel végzett autogén tréning folyamatba. Megmutatja, miként fejleszti a rendszeres AT-gyakorlás egy már eleve magas szintű önreflektív készséggel rendelkező szakember éntudatosságát, önismeretét, és járul hozzá pozitív változásokhoz szakmai és személyes életében.

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Kulcsszavak: autogén tréning, AT, segítő szakember, alkoholhasználat zavar, felépülő szenvedélybeteg

Introduction: Autogenic training in the context of social work

Autogenic training (AT) is a structured relaxation method (Schultz & Luthe, 1969; Krapf, 1992) that has been in use for approximately a century. Its effectiveness has been demonstrated by a substantial body of scientific research. AT reduces physical and psychological tension, stress, and anxiety, as well as sleep disturbances and other conditions associated with these problems. The body-mind method is based on the use of silently repeated, mentally formulated self-suggestions – *formulas* (for more, see Mirgain & Singles, 2023). The person adopts a relaxed, comfortable posture, maintaining a state of *passive concentration*, relating to ongoing physical sensations and psychological experiences, and accepting these observations. Formulas are relaxation-inducing statements that gradually guide the person the physical sensations of relaxation, heaviness and warmth followed by focused awareness of major organs and body regions. The relaxation process may be complemented by additional techniques that are particularly effective in the relaxed state, such as an intention formula (self-suggestive statement).

Within the Hungarian training and service system, social workers are eligible to obtain a qualification enabling them to apply the method in their professional practice. As certified trainers, they can promote the well-being of clients across a wide range of social services. Practitioners in the caring professions themselves can use the method to cope with stress, prevent burnout, or manage demanding situations.

Research aim and method

This case study demonstrates how autogenic training may improve mental health and promote the development of self-awareness and self-reflective capacity. Social work is a demanding profession associated with a high risk of burnout (Bakker et al., 2020; Freiro et al, 2021; O’Leary & Tsui, 2024; Siebert & Siebert, 2007). Self-awareness and self-reflection are likewise fundamental competencies in helping professions. The following case study illustrates how the regular practice of relaxation state induced by AT can effectively deepen both self-reflection and self-awareness (Urdang, 2009) even in a practitioner whose level of self-awareness is already well developed.

This article is an *interpretive case study* on an autogenic training process. This approach focuses on providing a rich description of the subjective physical and psychological experiences, meaning-making processes, and developmental changes that emerge in a particular case. Though the account relies mainly on the participant’s own words, it is inevitably co-constructed, as the meanings emerging throughout the process are shaped in the dialogues between the participant and the trainer-researcher (Harrison et al., 2017; Stake, 1995).

The first interview

First impressions

Zoltán (the participant's pseudonym) arrived on time, as he did for all subsequent sessions. A man of average height, somewhat overweight, bald, ageing, yet energetic and smiling. He appeared calm and balanced. It was evident that he felt comfortable and, overall, was doing well. Owing both to his age, his identity as a recovering alcoholic¹, and his past and present work as a helping professional, he radiated the impression of someone with extensive lived experiences. He seemed like a person directing situations, yet he also possessed some self-criticism. He had exceptionally good communication skills, and his level of self-reflectivity was far above average. His entire worldview appeared mature; he was capable of speaking about himself in a composed, deeply reflective, yet humorous and captivating manner. Alongside his self-confidence, I sensed the feeling that he was attempting to position himself within this unfamiliar situation, while consciously entrusting himself to what was to come. He was present as someone strong yet not preparing for boundary violations or domination. Rather, he trusted. He had not arrived seeking help, but rather as someone wishing to learn.

As we began talking, he folded his arms across his chest. As someone evidently conscious even in terms of body language (Pease, 1989), he immediately indicated that he was doing so not out of withdrawal or disrespect, but because this posture somewhat relieved the strain on his back and shoulders, which had been worn down during his earlier work as a technician.

Overall, my strongest first impression was that the relationship between us was balanced and secure, and that we would be able to work together comfortably. My only concern was that Zoltán, a recovering alcoholic and an experienced helping professional with well-established narrative schemas, might rely on these instead of committing himself to the spontaneous and exploratory processes of present-moment perceptions. I resolved these doubts by reminding myself that there was no need for concern: whatever Zoltán brought, he would certainly bring *something*, and that was what we would work with.

Importantly, no contraindications regarding AT were present, and his sobriety was stable. He showed a strong interest in AT and seemed highly motivated.

Brief life history

Zoltán works as a helping professional and contributes to the education of the next generation of practitioners by teaching future professionals as an adjunct lecturer. He could already have retired, but he enjoys working. He feels that so long as he still has something to give and can be of use to others, he is happy to continue. As a recovering alcoholic he is member of a self-help community. Between 19 and 41, he was actively using alcohol. He gave up drinking more than 20 years ago and is now stably sober. He described himself as having been born into an "alcoholic dynasty". His father, grandfather, great-grandfather, paternal uncles, and cousins all had (or have) alcohol use disorder, and one of his uncles died by suicide. Zoltán's father was an educated, successful, sensitive, versatile, creative and cultivated man, living separately from them at the time of his death. Zoltán identified his body, and he found that his father had died in undignified circumstances, "in filth". His mother drank alcohol occasionally; although she

¹ This is the usual self-identification for members of some recovering fellowships.

was not dependent, she recurrently abused tranquillisers to “medicate” her problems. His maternal grandfather suffered from depression, while his maternal uncle had both alcohol use disorder and depression. Both ended their own lives by suicide. During his period of active alcoholism, Zoltán himself also experienced suicidal thoughts: he felt that if he could not stop drinking, he would kill himself. However, this never progressed to action. He has two “failed marriages” behind him, from which he has three sons, now adults, with whom he has a good relationship. Two of them also became addicted but are now in recovery. Zoltán sees it as his mission to “break the family legacy”.

After increasingly severe and painful years spent in active alcoholism, a turning point came in Zoltán’s life when he stopped drinking. In recovery, he gradually rebuilt himself and his life, step by step, and today he is successful and satisfied. Originally, he worked as a technician, but following his recovery he changed his career. He became a recognised teacher in a professional training programme and, within his community of recovery, an authentic and widely respected figure. Recovery also involved his spiritual development – a Christian believer keeping his openness.

As he stated, he has arranged everything in his life and will leave behind neither burdens nor debts. His third marriage, which he entered as a person in recovery, is stable and happy.

Recently, Zoltán has been striving to reflect upon his life and move towards a few more years of quality and fulfilment. He is preoccupied with the question of when to retire. He feels to be somewhere on the threshold, yet he does not feel that the time has come. He feels useful, provides support to others, and passes on his experience and knowledge.

Body

Until about 35, Zoltán had been athletic, playing football and practising judo, but then he “fell apart” physically and felt uncomfortable with his body. Recently, however, he has accepted both his “stockiness” and baldness. He now likes his body. Three years ago, he was diagnosed with cardiac arrhythmia. Since then, he has been taking heart rhythm medication, which, as he described, “does not let the engine overrev”, and blood thinners, mainly for preventive reasons. He also received treatment for prostate problems. As he put it, after 60 there are aches and pains here and there, but he does not resent his body; on the contrary, he is grateful, as it functions rather well. His digestion is good. His musculature is stiff; it has always been so. He regularly visits a massage therapist and feels he deserves it. His senses are excellent for his age.

Naturally, he also mentioned his alcohol problem. His active alcoholism spanned 22 years. By now, he spent more time in recovery than he did drinking. In a drunken state, he compressed his right arm while unconscious, suffering temporary paralysis, which required treatment for several weeks. Later, he suffered a torn biceps, again in his right arm, while moving items in his mother’s flat; this required surgery.

Owing to an inflammation of the vocal cords in his youth, his voice is somewhat dull and husky. He underwent vocal cord surgery because a tumour had been suspected, though it ultimately proved not to be a serious problem. Earlier, he had undergone surgery for a deviated septum to restore ventilation in his nose.

Psychological strengths

He thinks of himself as a forgiving person – not resentful to anyone including himself. He claims – and this is also my experience – that he communicates well and sees the humorous side of things. He is empathetic and capable of deep commitment to matters important to him.

Preliminary goals

Zoltán articulated his *aims* regarding AT clearly: he wished to develop greater self-awareness – *which, in my opinion, was already at a high level* –, to see things more clearly, to relax, to live in greater harmony, and to reassess the lessons of his memories. During the first interview, he had not mentioned any *specific problem* on which he would wish to work; however, such issues emerged later: mild overeating, tension resulting from workplace conflicts, procrastination, resistance and fears related to official-administrative activities, and the consequences of a sedentary lifestyle.

Framework and ethical considerations

We agreed on 15 sessions, once a week for 50 minutes. During the training, Zoltán would work actively, practise twice daily, and keep a journal, which he would also bring to the sessions. All data would be treated confidentially. I also prepared a *consent form* for a potential scientific publication. Zoltán accepted this on the condition that I asked for his approval for the final text. Accordingly, Zoltán has read the exact Hungarian translation of the text, we discussed it in detail, and after requesting minor clarifications, and the omission of certain details, he approved it.

The process of autogenic training

Bodily experiences, associations, and emotional work related to the formulas

From the beginning, Zoltán found the *relaxation formulas* (for a detailed description, see Mirgain & Singles, 2023) relatively easy to follow. During the first session, he experienced a slightly “unstable state”, noting that there was “suddenly a lot of air”, and that his breathing was “searching for its rhythm”, after which “another, rhythmic breathing pattern” emerged. Also in the first session, he mentioned that “in a relaxed state I tend to clench my hands, to hold on”, but that “this was not missing now, because I do not need to control the situation; I am not left on my own, because this is a guided situation”. *This trust – that he did not need to hold on because the trainer was “holding” the situation – may be initially positive in an unknown situation but the aim is to reach relaxation independently in the future.* He described his sense of safety through the image of a “resting guard” and “satisfaction after work”, conveying that he does not need to be on alert. Also in the first session, he reported the strangeness of a thought-free state, as his mind is usually active – in a good sense, as he emphasised, creatively so.

By the sixth session, the state of relaxation deepened considerably. As he described it:

(...) an interesting experience, as if I am withdrawing into myself. Even skin sensations reach me less. It is as if I am moving away from the bodily boundaries that are in contact with the environment, and distancing myself from my brain, from my thoughts. The things that are

happening now feel as if they belong to the past. I also slightly detach from my skin, and from my brain.

For Zoltán, the state of relaxation is like the state immediately following morning awakening, when thoughts of the “yes, but...” type have not yet emerged. In this state, he sees clearly; dilemmas that previously appeared complex and confused suddenly become transparent and straightforward. One such important dilemma concerned a previous situation in which his former supervisor left the workplace to continue therapeutic work in a new setting and invited Zoltán to join the new team. At that time, he was struggling with whether to go or stay. He ruminated on this for a long time, until one morning, upon awakening, a clear image and decision of staying emerged.

He wanted to develop his self-knowledge and to gain new perspectives on things. He reported such an experience during relaxation: he “almost heard his thoughts”. Someone was speaking about his mother, and the image of the Pietà appeared before him: he directly experienced how painful it must have been for his mother to witness her son’s deterioration due to alcohol use disorder. He also sensed his mother’s guilt: “What did I do wrong?”. He almost cried yet was able to experience all this clearly and without guilt. In another instance that Zoltán also referred to, he felt that the relaxation sessions were helping him see things in a new light: he became aware that his grief over long-ended family relationships and former workplace communities had not yet fully come to closure (Klass et al., 2014).

Though Zoltán did not bring an explicit “problem” to the first interview, a bodily sensation emerged in relaxation: even in a seated position, he became aware of a barely noticeable underlying muscular tension that he had not previously perceived. This led him to change his sitting posture to reach a more relaxed bodily state. At this point, the previous tension became conscious. In the subsequent discussions it emerged that his workdays were stressful, leading to a subtle, barely perceptible baseline tension, which was illuminated by the contrast provided by relaxation. *This awareness is a major result. Furthermore, the relaxation process appeared to facilitate the emergence of a calmer, more composed, and more balanced internal state, while at the same time increasing energy levels. As the baseline tension becomes conscious, he becomes calmer.* For example, a recurring theme was that people in his environment, who occasionally behaved in a malicious or manipulative way, caused tension in Zoltán. Zoltán clearly attributed the reduction of this tension to relaxation practice, reporting that he became able to relate to such difficult individuals with greater emotional distance and calmness; let these situations go and no longer feels compelled to resolve the unpleasant dynamics himself. He became more flexible, calm, and magnanimous. As a result, he gives feedback to those around him in a composed and reflective manner.

In the transition from tension to relaxation/release, a pattern began to emerge for Zoltán, with earlier parallels in his life: periods when he drank – using alcohol to relieve tension – and later, in recovery, when he relied on a higher power, on God.

The experience of driving also fits into this pattern for him: the moving car represents a synthesis of intensity and calm. A stationary car evokes an even more relaxed state. In the past, he often drank in the car. It also appeared that this pattern included his positive experience of guided relaxation, being free from alertness and relying on guidance. During AT, his independent relaxation practice also began to integrate into this pattern of tension release based on letting go of control, surrendering, and allowing himself to be carried by the process.

The *heaviness formulas* generally went smoothly for Zoltán; he experienced the state of heaviness as a sense of stability, “like when you put down a loosely filled sack and it stays

firmly in place". Regarding the heaviness in his legs, he used metaphors "as if I were wearing high boots, without tone, nothing needs to be held", "as if I am settled, secure in myself", or like "a diver whose legs are weighted down, making him stable". "The first surprise" occurred when he experienced *heaviness in the right arm*. For him, the right hand is associated with action and control, and the medical problems mentioned previously had been seen as the exposure of his alcohol problem. Now, after his initial surprise, he experienced a pleasant sense of relief: "I should not try to control things – this is a kind of ego-lessness: letting God act." As he put it, "It is not about doing nothing; there is a kind of action in it: I enjoy *doing* nothing. I *am doing* nothing." This expression – "doing nothing" – also became part of his own vocabulary for conscious passivity, which he also brought as an associative task related to relaxation.

The experience of heaviness also brought up painful memories, from which further emotional work emerged. He associated it with the saying "my heart is heavy", and this led to a deeper autobiographical episode. He recalled his second divorce, which had been preceded by a "prolonged period of unhappiness":

Selling the house, moving here and there – our life went somewhere else. A lifetime's work went wrong: the house. My wife had already moved out, packed up, and I was left alone in the stripped house. The coldness of the whole thing sat on my heart as pain. I physically felt the heaviness; I could barely lift my arm, as if it were made of lead. I would have left everything behind. It gave me deep joy that my son came to help. My friend was with me, and my little son.

In relation to this divorce period, Zoltán also said:

I came out of mourning by saying: "I will lie down now.". My partner [the one he is still married to today] and her daughter started to clear the house out. And I was able to accept it. I consciously searched for positive anchors. I was 59 years old – the same age my father was when he died in filth. I was 11 years into sobriety. My sons stood by me. Today I have a two-room flat with a beautiful view. It looks onto the playground where [earlier, while still in "active alcoholism" and living in this area] I did not play enough with my children. This was how I outlived my father. I won the war, although the losses were great. Both of my older sons were already abstinent.

Among the associations connected to *lightness*, themes of competence and self-confidence emerged, as well as transforming difficulties into ease – for example, in learning. In his younger years, he had been anxious about higher education, yet at the influence of his first father-in-law, he decided to pursue it. From this point, his self-esteem began to develop; challenges demonstrated to him that "I can do it".

Warming formulas evoked memories on sports. When he had muscle strain, he would receive massage with a warming cream, which improved his condition. He even recalled the smell of the cream. For Zoltán, warming is associated with increased energy. Overall, as he put it, "likes to stay in the warm range"; warmth gives him relaxation. Among colours and light, he also prefers warmth; he adjusts the television to "warm tones". Cold, by contrast, evokes tension in him. He recalls times when he fell asleep intoxicated without a blanket and woke up completely chilled: "those miserable mornings came, the ruined days before". The first drinks in the morning then provided relaxation and warmth. "Warm tears are gratitude; cold tears are pain and anger." Warmth is positive and loving. Coldness, for example, is when he feels attacked and pointless disputes arise. In the past, he would flee from cold atmospheres and conflicts. With his previous wives, he tended to avoid confrontation even when it was warranted and instead made the situation more bearable by drinking. Today, he no longer considers himself

conflict-avoidant; when necessary, he engages in situations in both professional and private contexts. However, he does not like cold arguments and disagreements but instead seeks solutions that are beneficial for everyone.

During the sequence of relaxation–heaviness–warming, he experienced small twitching movements in his fingers, like the spontaneous micro-adjustments that occur in a relaxed state (for example, in bed when the body relaxes and twitches); “as my internal tensions settle, energy is released”. He identified an “activity curve”, which he illustrated with his hand: slowing down and deepening during relaxation and heaviness, followed by a gradual upward trajectory of warming and becoming increasingly energetic.

With the introduction of the *breathing formula*, this energised state intensified into a “vitalised condition”, as if the air were invigorating the blood. He brought many associations to this: washing off after long work, a window opened, being underwater for a long time and then coming up to breathe again. However, he experienced *abdominal warming* as “counteracting the vitalising effect of breathing” – as if blood were leaving the head and accumulating in the lower abdomen, producing an almost sleep-like, deeper relaxation. This evoked the intimacy of candlelight and childhood Christmases.

When Zoltán spoke about his *body schema drawing* – a schematic representation of his body from the front and back, marking areas of acceptance and rejection – he differentiated his relationship to himself not only in terms of like/dislike (or positive/negative), but also in terms of past/present states. (See Table 1 for a summary.)

Table 1

Findings related to the body schema drawing

Past	Present
I was not accepting of my body	overall, I am more accepting of my body
I did not like: short arms and legs, large head (I was teased as a child because of this), baldness	I accept this now
until about the age of 35 I was more athletic, and I liked that	I do not like excess weight
negative: alcohol caused erectile dysfunction	positive: sexuality is age-appropriate
disturbing: excessive sweating	this has decreased by now
inner unrest – heart problems	- normalised, but the medication does not allow my heart to exceed a certain rate – I feel uncomfortable about this - limiting boundaries: I can no longer do as much as before, but I accept it - what I could change: I always travel by car; I could move more, e.g. two intensive walks per week (I have bought hiking shoes); I could also use a bicycle for short trips
shoulder, back, hips: uncomfortable due to my technician past	this is still uncomfortable today
as an alcoholic I damaged my body	- “I have survived myself”: this is a gift - I must not get too hungry, otherwise I become a compulsive overeater

I like my manual skills	I still like this
- my sensory perception is good - I have good colour perception, which is a source of joy - taste and smell are excellent	still good for my age
my reflexes are good	still good today
I did not like it: my voice has been hoarse and dull since the age of 16 (due to vocal cord inflammation)	I have now accepted it
although I never studied music, I have good musical hearing and I enjoy music	still the same today
I like my cognitive abilities and my thinking	- still the same today - I consider it normal that my short-term memory is weakening

The *formulas of blood circulation and heart* brought pleasant sensations: “this is a complex system, mine. I have something within me that is worth pausing for, to be grateful towards – something that functions within me, flows, and is reliable.” He added: “What exists is not just there; it *is*. When it fades, it is often then that its value becomes more apparent.” In the evening, when going to bed, he adopts a particular posture: he places his left hand (the side of the heart) under his head, while his right hand (his action-oriented side) rests in the crook of his left arm. In this position he can hear his heartbeat, which fills him with deep calm. He recalled that in his childhood, when his parents still lived together, loud arguments were frequent. For Zoltán, this position – reminiscent of a foetal posture – became a refuge from evening conflicts, and by listening to his heartbeat, he was able to escape the situation and calm himself.

Daily practice and journal keeping

AT requires self-directed daily practising. As Zoltán reported, one of his daily practices takes place in the evening after work – in the most comfortable chair available in his home: “Fifteen minutes is not just fifteen minutes”, as he put it, as preparations and winding down also take time. The evening practice is complete and deeply immersive. The other daily practice takes place during the lunch break at work in an office where he can withdraw. The environment is not entirely quiet and external noises can disturb him, but he is still able to reach the stages of relaxation–heaviness–warming within a few minutes, which already restores his energy. This is a compromise of “one and a half relaxations” per day. In the fifth session, reflecting on the positive effects of practising, he commented:

When relaxation goes well, even a shorter one, I can distance myself more from blockages, I don’t overthink – this is completely new for me. You don’t always have to overthink and worry. Let things happen. You will feel when it is time to act. The hunter is calm and only acts when the game appears.

He also reflected on his eating habits, noting that overeating hinders his practice. He mentioned his inclination to binge eating. His attempts to manage it have not resulted full

success. Although this was not mentioned in the first interview, AT has influenced this positively. As he began to enjoy practising, it became increasingly important for him that nothing should interfere with relaxation. His eating habits have changed: before relaxation, he eats light, and afterwards he no longer feels the need for more.

By the ninth session, Zoltán indicated that he increasingly integrated practising AT into his life. As he put it: “I am beginning to get a taste of autogenic training.” If he accidentally forgets it, then he misses it. As a result of practising, he can regain calm more quickly after stressful working days. Previously, he would continue to ruminate for one or two days. His activity level has noticeably increased. The short midday relaxation is sufficient, like a “peasant’s midday siesta”, to provide a short rest and then move him forward, filling him with new energies. *Through the practice, a natural rhythm, aligning with the time of day, has been re-established.* Further, procrastination has been replaced by decisiveness.

A further emergent topic was journal keeping. From the outset, Zoltán did not engage extensively in note-taking. He generally completed his associative homework assignments, but did not always record his experiences of the relaxation exercises, often recounting them from memory instead. Around two-thirds into the AT process, his note-taking became even less frequent. He partly attributed this to his increasing workload and accumulating responsibilities; however, it also became apparent that he was experiencing resistance.

Blockages and resistances

A blockage occurred for Zoltán at the formula “*my lower back relaxes, then my hips relax*”. He explained this by ageing and his sedentary lifestyle much earlier, during his work as a technician, which involved sitting in a concentrated, rigid posture for long hours. This also stiffened his neck and shoulders, although over time some of the tension gradually released. His lower back and hips, however, have remained significantly rigid, restricting his range of movement. During the discussions, a deeper connection also emerged here. He recalled that he had once considered going swimming, but his wife, an active woman in other sports, cannot swim. This circumstance presented an excuse for procrastination: did not take up swimming either.

He reported resistance to the formula “*my mouth opens slightly*”: his mouth did not open spontaneously; he had to actively facilitate it. The image of an open mouth reminded him of his earlier nasal septum surgery. Since then, he prefers to breathe through his nose. Before the operation, his mouth was often open, which he felt gave him an “idiotic” appearance.

Journal writing elicited a major resistance in Zoltán. This was related to his fear of, aversion to, and procrastination regarding forms, administrative tasks, and official matters. An early school memory emerged. A form-like geography workbook evoked strong anxiety: “Oh no, just don’t let me get it wrong!”. Later, when he was a self-employed technician, administrative tasks related to his business – official paperwork, forms, invoices, tax matters – caused him significant difficulty. He repeatedly postponed or avoided these tasks, accompanied by considerable anxiety. “I did not want to see the numbers”, he said. This anxiety connected to documentation is still present in his life today: “it is as if the world is being pulled out from under me”. This appears both in his work and in everyday life, making his stomach contract, palms sweat, breathing rapid, and his voice rises in pitch. Although he has been sober for 24 years, “there is still a similar sense of threat in me with regard to alcohol”, adding “How much unresolved anxiety is still within me?” His documents and invoices are, in fact, ordered; everything is stored in several folders, but he seldom manages these, so he often feels uncertain

about what is where and whether everything is in place. Administrative systems, which relentlessly demand accountability for errors and omissions, weigh on him as an oppressive burden. He experiences fear and a sense of helplessness in the face of this, as if unable to master the chaos, even though he knows that this is unfounded. *Behind these feelings of uncertainty, childhood experiences of disorganisation and lack of safety became visible: the father with alcohol use disorder who was absent and subsequently left the family, and the sometimes drinking, medication-abusing, emotionally injured and anxious mother; unpredictable, at times overly emotional and intrusive, at other times controlling, critical, demeaning, and undermining.* A recurring remark she directed both at Zoltán and his separately living father was: “You are just like ... [his father’s surname, which is also Zoltán’s].” Zoltán recalled being shamed by his mother over a “poorly completed” lottery ticket, which she refused to submit, though it would have yielded four correct matches of five. On another occasion, after Zoltán had bought a pair of jeans, she asked: “Was that really necessary?” Or during a tyre change: “Are you sure you can do it properly?” Despite all this, he remained in a close relationship with his mother until her death. *Zoltán – who in his professional and interpersonal roles is generally strong, stable, and dominant – experiences a partially regressed, child-like position in relation to administrative duties.* Now his wife helps him with paperwork, and he may snap at her if something is not in order – later, regretting the reproaches.

Turning point

Zoltán appeared calm, stable and self-confident: through relaxation he reorganised and re-experienced his memories, deepened his self-knowledge, tensions at work gradually dissolved, and he became more energetic. He produced rich associations. Despite the many painful memories he carried, he was fundamentally in control of the situation. As a recovering alcoholic, he had considerable experience in self-examination; his narratives about his life were well rehearsed and highly consolidated. The processes mobilised by AT were constructive, with not any “drama”; they fitted smoothly into his established narratives. Overall, he seemed to remain within his comfort zone.

A noticeable change occurred when, towards the end of the guided AT process he introduced a problem, an uncontrolled, currently distressing and anxiety-provoking issue: the aforementioned “document phobia”. This emerged in relation to his resistance to keeping a diary on AT experiences – and in a real-life situation, the purchase of a car. As he put it, “this is my weak point”: fear, reluctance and procrastination in everything related to documents, official paperwork and administrative tasks. Regression appeared: it was as if a dependent, childlike part of him had surfaced, briefly disrupting his usual role and stepping outside the AT consultation frame. Rationally, he knew where the necessary document should be, yet he feared it might not be there after all. He then turned to me and said he would write (between two AT sessions) to confirm whether it was where he thought it was. I consciously made it clear that I understood him; I was familiar with what he was describing, as official matters and administration are not my strength either. At the same time, I let him know that it would be more useful to remain within the agreed framework and return to this issue at the next session.

Along this episode, Zoltán’s previously discussed decision-making difficulty re-emerged – no longer as a memory, but as a current and pressing issue. Should he remain loyal to his old car, which still functioned adequately, or allow himself to purchase a safer, better vehicle? *It appears that there is a connection between administration and decision-making:*

both involve the possibility of making mistakes – in the dimension of adulthood and responsibility. Ambivalence and uncertainty in decision-making seemed to be linked to his image of his mother. He lived with his mother in the same household for a long time: “I was the head of the family, responsibility was mine, but at the same time my mother was constantly grumbling.” Zoltán noted that over the decades of work in his recovery from alcohol use disorder, he had developed significantly in overcoming indecision and in making firm decisions. Once he reaches the point of deciding, it brings him relief. Previously, this happened in the AT-like state he experienced occasionally early morning when he was not fully awake; and things seemed clear. *For him, the most important aspect of relaxation is that it helps clarify the tangled complexity, leading him from dilemma to decision.*

The same (twelfth) week we were working with the formula *warm body – cool forehead – clear head*, to which he immediately associated the state he experiences when waking at around five a.m.: “the bed is pleasantly warm, and clear thoughts come at the same time.” Similar clarity of thought arises after a warm bath or a sauna. In his associative homework task, the cool forehead / clear head represented a calmness opposed to impulsive reactivity. Here he explicitly linked his mother and his wife who sometimes also “questions back”, though without any negative intent. He loved his mother and feels he has forgiven her (as well as his father). He prevents himself from automatically identifying his wife with his mother by maintaining a cool head: “this was not said by my mother [and not in that way], but by my wife”.

Another current dilemma concerns his retirement. The work is sometimes demanding, but he continues working because he still feels useful, an impression also strengthened by relaxation experiences. As he stated: “I am now *using* relaxation; it has practical benefits. It creates an effective basis for decision-making – it is a tool.”

His *intention formula* was: “*I am able to make decisions at the right time.*” For him, this means, on the one hand, that there is no need for immediate decision-making; he can safely set the question aside until the appropriate moment arrives. At the same time, he can trust that clarity will emerge at the right time and that he will be able to make the decision. It also implies, as he noted, that once a decision is made, he does not subsequently question it but accepts it as the right decision at that moment. Nevertheless, some flexibility remains: if new considerations arise, decisions can usually be re-adjusted.

Regarding the clarifying and decision-supporting role of relaxation, he described it as follows:

It takes me inward, I let go of the world, I linger in a purified space where, through attention to my inner essence, I can perceive my relationship between self and world differently. I enter a more essential mode of perception: vivid colours fade, while faint colours become stronger.

He uses an analogy to describe the experience: “I was out night fishing; the lights of the opposite settlement disappeared. As my eyes adapted, the landscape reorganised: what was prominent gave way to what was essential.” Another analogy: “Coming out of the relaxation, I notice camouflaged, detail-demanding things more easily”.

From dilemma, through relaxation, he arrives at clarity and decision. “Where should I go? Straight ahead, turn back, or branch off sideways?” The options are confusing and numerous. During relaxation he withdraws inward; doubts dissolve; the overall picture simplifies, and the essence becomes visible, giving him peace and making him smile. He places focus in the *heart*. Although clear head plays a major role in his decision-making, he wants to come to his decisions in an emotionally attuned way.

Conclusions: AT's main impacts

Autogenic training supported Zoltán in developing self-knowledge, enabling him to see the interconnections of his life more clearly and to re-experience and re-evaluate his memories. At this more advanced stage of life, he also felt a strong impulse towards reflection and life review. At the time, he had a minor traffic accident: although he was not legally at fault – being hit from behind – he was able to reflect more openly and acknowledge his own responsibility, recognising that he had become distracted and had braked slightly more abruptly than necessary at a pedestrian crossing. Regular relaxation has enabled him to see himself more clearly and with greater objectivity.

AT created a contrast with his everyday state, thereby bringing awareness to a previously unnoticed level of tension in his workdays, and a general underlying psychophysical tension. Alongside this awareness of tension, the calm induced by relaxation has reduced overall strain. As a result, he can approach other people's intrigues or professional disagreements with noticeably greater distance and composure. When tense situations arise at work, he can disengage from them more quickly, whereas previously he would typically ruminate on them for days. "Overthinking" what is not relevant at the given moment is no longer dwelt upon.

He is more in control of his eating. He values the quality of his relaxation practice, which would be disrupted by overeating; and after relaxation, he is less prone to binge eating. At the same time, he has become more energetic and can cope better with the rest of the day's challenges after a short midday relaxation. He reported increased initiative and reduced procrastination. This is expressed in small but meaningful everyday actions. He has also become more motivated to engage in physical activity. The energising and motivating effect of AT leads him to cycle independently: the self-care activity does not depend on his wife's company.

Zoltán's problems concerning paperwork, documentation, official forms and administrative matters, as his weakest point and the least controlled area of his life caused considerable anxiety. During AT, a clearly observable bionomic, organising tendency emerged. He began to sort out the papers that filled his drawers, which significantly reduced his anxiety. While he may never become highly efficient in administrative matters, he was nevertheless able to come to terms with incomplete administration: "I believe I am still fine even with incomplete administration".

Relaxation, and this represented one of the most important developments for Zoltán, helps him to perceive what is essential in a clarified form, move beyond ambivalent states, and supports his decision-making.

Overall, Zoltán's level of awareness, a critical tool in social work (Urdang, 2009), has increased and he wants to continue to use AT in the future. Zoltán's case has demonstrated that AT helps reduce the stresses of professional and private life, improve self-knowledge and practise self-care. Re-evaluating and giving voice to one's experiences deeply anchored in the body is a road to psychological integration, integrity, and autonomy. The most important resource for a social professional is their personality; and AT is an efficient method to maintain and improve practitioners' mental health.

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