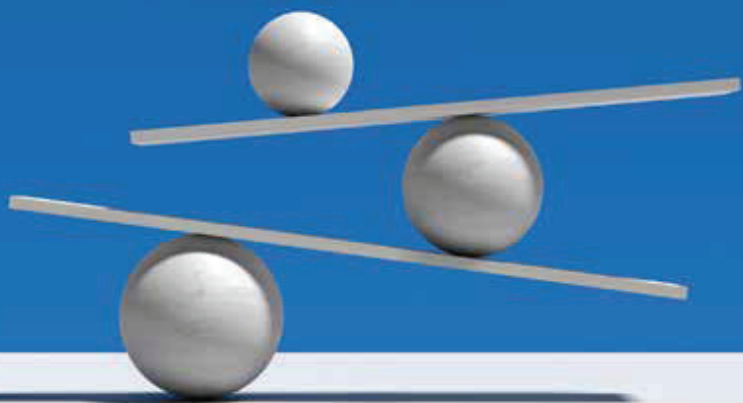


Angle of Repose

By Daniel J. Bressler, MD, FACP



DEFINITION: THE "angle of repose" describes the maximum slope at which a mound of loose particles, such as sand or soil, can maintain its structure without collapsing. This angle represents the boundary between stability and slide, measured from the horizontal.

In physiology, the concept akin to this is homeostasis, a delicate balance of numerous factors that enable life to flourish. We, along with all of life, exist within an interlocking mesh of "Goldilocks phenomena" — conditions that are just right, not too extreme in any direction, which underpin the dynamic nature of biological adaptation.

In the narrative of our lives, our "granular material" is composed of our genetic and epigenetic inheritance, and our experiences

up to the present moment. Eventually, this process reaches a critical point, where stability gives way to disorder — be it through disease or accident.

The poignant reality that frames the longitudinal practice of medicine is this: We all tread a precarious path over an abyss that will, in time, claim us. The acknowledgment of our inherent fragility and mortality casts a shadow over our lives, but in this shadow, we find the potential for profound experiences. When we are fortunate and intentional, this backdrop allows for moments and even years of love, art, joy, and service. +

Angle of Repose

These lives which sometimes seem to be so stable
Our job, our health, our loves, our face, our clothes
Are always balanced halfway off the table
Dangling at the angle of repose

All the acts of fate that nearly knock us
All the curtains ducked before they close
The Do Not Enter signs that do not block us
Help maintain the angle of repose

Recall the times we planned and almost acted
Yet stopped before things really came to blows
Compared to other agents who in fact did
And got crushed beneath the angle of repose

From knowing when to stay and when to scatter
Escaping out of range when others froze
To pluck essential truth from idle chatter
Is to navigate the angle of repose

Do we tolerate an easy shallow answer
While cynicism roots and slowly grows?
Do we strive to extirpate such cancer
Or surrender to this angle of repose?

You aimed to live a life of quiet service
But your eyes have seen the darkness and it shows
So instead of getting peace you just get nervous
Clutching at the angle of repose

If you're convinced the world conspires to stress you,
You'll always end up bloodied from its blows.
Yet if you hold its twists and turns might bless you,
You strengthen your own angle of repose.

A continuum of carnival and prison
And all the consequences these suppose
Suspended at each fragile station risen
Balanced at the angle of repose



Dr. Bressler has been practicing internal medicine in San Diego since 1984. During his career he has taught medical students and residents, and also chaired various hospital committees. He is currently affiliated with Scripps Mercy Hospital and Mission Hills Post Acute Care.

