

Dealing With Stress Through Mindfulness

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We all know when we are “stressed out.” But what is stress? Stress is actually how we respond to events in our lives we call stressors. There are internal and external stressors. External stressors are things like deadlines at work or an argument with a significant other. Internal stressors could be emotional abuse experienced as a child. The stressor itself may not affect your health, but the physical reaction that your body experiences can.

The mind and body are closely interlinked. Your body is wired to protect itself against stressors. When your mind is delivered a stressor, your body experiences a hyperarousal response which is intended to work to protect yourself. However, if this response occurs too often and is not controlled, it can affect your health in a negative way. It can reduce your immune strength, making it easier for you to get sick. It can also contribute to chronic medical conditions such as cardiovascular disease, irritable bowel syndrome and muscle tension headaches.

What can you do?

Eliminate your stressors if possible. Easier said than done? Often it is. But take a look anyway at the things that bring you stress. Can you change any of them? Organize home or office one step at a time. Consider career changes if possible. Professional advice from a counselor can have significant benefits for you and your family. Take time for yourself.

Exercise. Physical exercise can reduce blood pressure and heart rate. Those who exercise regularly sleep better, are healthier and reap the added benefits of feeling good about themselves.

Get outside. The outdoors offers a great



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opportunity for exercise. In addition, though, it provides space and, for many, a place for spiritual connection that can minimize life’s pressures.

Mindfulness. More and more, information supports the benefits of mindfulness. Mindfulness uses the inner resources for healing. It provides a way of dealing with difficult thoughts and emotions. And, it’s available anytime, anywhere – by you.

Mindfulness involves the simple act of focusing on your breathing. Why breathing? Breathing is soothing and rhythmic. It’s universal – everyone does it! And, like exercise, it has healing properties. It can create a relaxation response (opposite of the hyperarousal response). During mindfulness breathing you observe your thoughts – without judgment, without suppressing them and without indulging them. By doing this you become more aware, develop greater insight into your reactions to stressors, create new options for behaving, bring about greater acceptance of yourself — often then, the moment of stress will pass as you are engaged in the activity of mindfulness.

Here’s how to practice mindfulness:

Sit in a chair, feet on the floor, body erect but comfortable. Close your eyes and begin diaphragmatic breathing. Diaphragmatic breathing is achieved by taking a deep breath and seeing the breath inflate your abdomen. Observe your breath from start to finish: visualize the breath entering your nostrils, entering your airways, reaching the lungs and inflating your abdomen; then, visualize the breath leaving your lungs, deflating your abdomen on its way up to the airways and out through the nostrils. (In... and ...out slowly and
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calmly and rhythmically. Then begin to observe your thoughts. For each thought observe its content and how it makes you feel. Simply note it. Don't judge it. Bring yourself back to your breath and continue to observe it. As thoughts, come repeat above – observe it and how it makes you feel and note it.

Utilize mindfulness as described above during periods of stress. It is also helpful to set aside some time regularly to practice as well; if practiced daily for several minutes you will be able to bring on mindfulness very readily.

You will create a new and better way of dealing with stressful thoughts and feelings.

A reference that I have found to be helpful is Jon Kabat-Zinn's book, "[Full Catastrophe Living](#)".

For more information, call Advanced HealthLine at (262) 512-2880 or toll-free at 1-888-709-2080 outside the Milwaukee metro area, or log on at www.ah.com.

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