

Stress: It's here to stay. What can we do?

Maybe it's your mind running a hundred miles a minute, or your body doing things that just aren't very comfortable anymore: acid reflux or arthritis; problems sleeping; maybe it's those blood tests and cholesterol problems, or high blood pressure. Or it's that colonoscopy that's scheduled, or menopause that, well it's always scheduled, just why now?! Then again it could be the worries, the anxiety or depression...

Or maybe it's not just "in here" but instead out there: at work, or perhaps it's that retirement is not what it's always been cracked up to be; or parents aging even faster than we are, or kids in college, or *not* in college. Whatever it is, it's causing problems; it's stressful!

But stress isn't just what's happening to us. Did you ever notice that not everybody is stressed out by the same situation? Stress is not what is happening so much as how we work with it. This means that we can reduce our stress if we can learn how to respond differently to the stressor, instead of reacting in our typical fashion. What does it take to change our auto pilot reactions into conscious and deliberate responses?

This was the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn and the Stress Reduction Clinic (now called the Center for Mindfulness, a division of the Department of Behavioral Medicine at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in Worcester). He developed a program called Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction that enables the participants to learn the skills necessary to lead more conscious and balanced lives in the face of their day-to-day stresses. The centerpiece of this program is called "mindfulness."

We all know what "mindlessness" is: it's getting to the rotary and realizing we haven't really been paying attention to the road. Or it's putting down the keys or our reading glasses and not remembering where they are, or why we opened the 'frig, or picked up the phone. Our minds are already onto the next task or idea, or back on the last worry, or replaying that persistent frustration.

"Mindfulness," on the other hand, is paying attention moment by moment on purpose and without judgment. It's the ability to be present with the ones we love, focus carefully on the task at hand, or work intelligently and compassionately with the strong emotion that rises in times of crisis.

Like any other worthwhile skill, learning to be mindful takes practice, especially in times of crisis or when working with stressful situations. Learning to be mindful requires that we pause or stop every so often and pay attention to what's going on in the mind and in the body. As we do this for short periods of time and learn what it really means to be aware of our minds and bodies, we begin to develop

the skills to observe our own reactions. With time that comes the ability to step into that cascade of reactive behaviors and choose to respond differently.

Much like learning to play a new musical instrument, we would learn the scales and very simple melodies first before having the skills to play a more complicated tune. Reading about it isn't enough. Similarly, practicing is just as crucial to learning mindfulness.

There are things however that we can do right now to encourage the development of mindfulness (see the sidebar). One is to pay attention to when we are on automatic pilot; and notice too when we are "in the zone," focused entirely on the task at hand. Learning to be aware of these opposite ends of the spectrum of awareness can allow us the opportunity to develop the skill of observing our own behavior.

So whenever the stress gets to you, stop... take a moment to assess the situation and just breathe. Give yourself the opportunity to step back and gain some perspective on the situation and view it as if it is the first time this is happening. Actually this situation *is* brand new, even if it does appear to be a re-enactment of a previous version. Can we let go of our assumptions about how this will end and think outside the box, opening ourselves to some new possibilities?

To respond instead of react is our avenue into a more deliberate style of behavior that can let us appreciate the lives we are living, even if they are full of what appears to be uncomfortable happenings. Zorba the Greek called it "the full catastrophe." All the happy things and all the not-so-happy things: this is our life and letting ourselves experience it more fully can actually reduce the stress we place on ourselves.

It sometimes seems counter-intuitive, but often the most difficult experiences of our lives turn out to be opportunities to learn the most, and we often look back upon them with different eyes. What if we could live those more difficult times with open eyes and less tension, *while they are happening?*

This is the basis of living mindfully, enjoying the "pleasant" and being able to work with what at first appears to be "unpleasant." So the next time that hot flash breaks or the kids or parents or spouse make untenable demands, take a breath and smile to yourself. You know something more about living with less stress. And it's another opportunity to practice.

This practice is the basis of the eight week program that is still offered at the Center for Mindfulness and at over 240 other locations around the country. Adam Liss runs one such program here on the Cape. For more information call him at 508.420.3300, or visit www.capestressreduction.com. © Adam Liss 2006