



Relaxation and Mindfulness: A Response to Stress

"Life is difficult," states Scott Peck, in his book *The Road Less Traveled*. He goes on to say that the process of confronting and solving problems is painful, but it gives our lives meaning. "Courage and wisdom are called forth and we grow mentally and spiritually."⁽¹⁾

Dealing with daily stressful situations does make life difficult, and stress has many sources: the environment, social expectations, relationships, loss, illness, accidents, and overwhelming thought processes, to name a few. Our body responds to stress in a variety of ways including headache, digestive problems, heart palpitations, rapid breathing, intense fatigue, etc.

An unchecked response to stress can cause a physiological reaction, which is often referred to as the fight-flight-freeze (F-F-F) response. Healthy body functions diminish or shut down, and all resources focus on survival. Blood flow increases to the extremities to allow fight or flight. Digestion slows down; rapid breathing increases. This makes sense for short periods of time when survival is the objective, but over a prolonged period, stress that is not managed may lead to serious, negative long-term effects. The freeze response literally shuts down the body as if paralyzed. It may be in response to a terrifying experience such as a car accident or an attack. People may pass out or mentally remove themselves from the situation so that they feel no pain. Sometimes they may have no explicit memory of the event. These F-F-F responses may help one survive the moment, but they then need to be released so as to allow the body to return to a normal state of functioning.

The relaxation response can turn the stress response off. When a situation is no longer deemed dangerous or a threat, then the emergency F-F-F signals can be discontinued to the brain stem, which in turn stops sending panic signals to the nervous system. Breathing, heart rate, metabolism, muscle tension, blood pressure all return to normal. Our mind has the capability of changing our physiology for the better. But how may we trigger the relaxation response?

Exercise is a powerful way to release stress and tension. Just as an animal will shake vigorously to release tension, so do we benefit from physical exertion. Regular exercise can reduce chronic stress.

Becoming aware of how our bodies react to stressors is another helpful skill. If we feel anxious about an upcoming event or encounter, where do we hold our tension? Take a moment to focus on your body. Naming this awareness helps bring attention to our stress so that we can respond appropriately.

Deep breathing is a good way to create relaxation.

Practice and focus are required to breathe with awareness. We all breathe automatically to live, but when we pay attention to our breathing we may discover it is shallow and rapid rather than deep and relaxed. Awareness brings the possibility for change. Focusing on the breath allows us to pause and make new choices as to how we may respond to a stressful situation.

Mindfulness and present moment awareness are very helpful practices to manage stress. Much stress comes from persistent thinking about the past or from worry about the future and what if...

Corrie ten Boom, a Dutch woman who bravely hid Jews during WWII and was later sent to a concentration camp, was noted for saying, “worry does not empty tomorrow of its sorrow; it empties today of its strength.”

Living in the present moment and focusing attention on what is happening right now does not allow stressful thoughts and fears to take over. Worry as healthy concern allows for problem solving but not when it takes over as catastrophic thinking.

Mindfulness, when practiced regularly, allows for both deep relaxation and insight. “It cultivates a way of being in a harmonious relationship with what is, whether nagging or obsessive thoughts, uncomfortable feelings, external stressors, or physical discomfort. By not pushing away or resisting the internal experience, a deep acceptance and ability to rest more fully in the present moment can be cultivated.”(2)

One way to practice mindfulness is to become mindful during daily activities, such as washing dishes, brushing teeth, climbing stairs, showering. Focus your attention on just what you are doing now. This allows you to recognize if you are on automatic pilot and then to choose to be present in the moment. Mindful awareness puts space around our activities and thoughts and allows us to see things more clearly, from an alternative perspective.

Even a little bit of mindfulness brought to a single moment can break the chain of events that leads to persistent unhappiness.

There are many books, audio resources, and classes on mindfulness, and many therapists teach it to their clients as a way to regain control and manage their stressful lives. “Sometimes just acknowledging what’s actually going on instead of dwelling on what ‘should’ be happening is all that is needed to transform our experience.”(3)

by Lindsay Watson, M.A., RMFT

References:

- (1) Peck, M. Scott. The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth. (1988)
- (2) Davis, et al. The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook. (2008)
- (3) Williams, Teasdale, Segal, Kabat-Zinn. The Mindful Way through Depression. (2007)

For Further Reading:

Kabat-Zinn, Jon. Mindfulness Meditation. CDs, Series 2.

Keating, Thomas. Intimacy with God: An Introduction to Centering Prayer. (2009)



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