

Stress has multiple impacts on body and mind functioning. It affects our stomach, as it impacts many gut functions and is related to gastro-intestinal disorders. It lowers thresholds in our immune system, thereby making it more difficult to fight off germs. It affects our minds and our ability to reason. So many things can be experienced as stressful. When we interpret events as stressful, we have a harder time being able to think and reason well, as the brain reverts to more basic functioning for survival purposes, fight or flight. We have a more difficult time even remembering that we have tools to help us manage stress, both how we perceive it, and what we do to help ourselves, -our bodies and minds, to cope and to calm. This is one reason why mindfulness and breath work can be so incredibly helpful.

We tend to miss living our lives. What I mean by this is that we spend a lot of time in our heads, in the past and the future. We replay past incidents, conversations, and conflicts, that play around and around in our minds. We think about what happened, what we wish we would've said, choices we could have made, OR we project into the future, going to our fears and anxieties about what MIGHT happen, worrying about what will be, getting anxious about possible outcomes. Sometimes, based on past repeated experiences, we become anxious that it always plays out this way, such as "He ALWAYS leaves a mess behind, or she NEVER is home on time, or, fearing the worst when, for example, we are awaiting medical results. We get so engrossed in our fears and anxieties of what we think will be, not may be, that not only can we not consider alternate possibilities, thereby possibly contributing to repetitions of the same outcomes, but we also miss the PRESENT. We truly don't notice what is going on NOW. And in that process we miss all of those possible little gems in the NOW, beautiful skies, or short but sweet interactions with others, a smile, or whatever small moments that added up make for a better day.

By becoming witnesses to ourselves, mindfulness helps us to notice where our mind is going, rather than just getting carried away by our thoughts and feelings. In that noticing, it creates a pause, where we can become more aware that we make choices. We can work towards creating choices in how we regard things, rather than just reacting automatically. In talking about choices as to how we react or deal with things, it doesn't mean that we don't/shouldn't or won't be bothered by things. Of course we will and we do, but so often we react to things automatically and unconsciously and we don't even realize that there is the possibility of choice or that we could use tools to help ourselves. Rather than becoming overwhelmed with frustration in the moment, we might be able to zoom out and take a larger perspective, as in, this might be a frustrating moment, but how important is it in the bigger scheme of my life, and how much energy do I want to give it? Or when we are overwhelmed with feelings of anxiety or worry about something that is happening in our lives, we can try to contain our anxiety and put it in perspective by asking ourselves, "Is there anything terrible happening in my life AT THIS VERY MOMENT?". It doesn't mean that there isn't something worrisome or even deeply troubling occurring, but it may mean that we can exercise choices around perceptions and use tools to help us calm down, like using breath work. It is understandable that we

worry, but does worry actually help us to act differently towards changing the outcome of something, or does it just suck a lot of energy and interfere with our being able to notice, enjoy, or appreciate anything good that might be occurring. We can also try to reshift our attention and focus by asking ourselves, “Is there anything good happening in my life at this very moment?”, which can help us to pay attention to what IS good.

We all have finite amounts of time and energy in our day. We are bound to encounter stress and challenge in our lives. We get frustrated at being cut off in traffic, or when the 5 minute task that we set out to do takes 20 minutes, cause the copier got jammed, or someone’s been rude, or we encounter just too many small stressors which add up. I think of it as the energy pie. Working on making conscious choices as to how we use our energy, our emotional energy, which interacts with and impacts our physical energy, can allow us greater enjoyment of our lives, even when they are challenging. As hard as it can be to appreciate in the moment, we can still make space for enjoying whatever IS positive; it is a matter of conscious choice. We can better exercise choice by using mindfulness, by paying attention to where our minds go and how we react. We can help care for ourselves by using tools to help ourselves calm. Physiologically we can’t be in a state of high stress at the same time that we are breathing deeply and slowly.

I find it helpful to try to remember to ask myself when I am getting carried away, “HOW MUCH TIME DO I WANT TO SPEND IN THE YUCK?” I think of the energy pie. It doesn’t mean that I didn’t get frustrated by something, but do I want to stay in that frustration? Sometimes I can see what I’m doing and make a different choice.

How we react in the moment to a situation might be influenced by our level of fatigue, dehydration, or when and what we last ate, and how many things are on our plates at any given time, or whether we are premenstrual, or in pain, or how many times we have repeated the same request, just to name a few contributors. So trying to remember to practice good basic self care is really important, i.e., sleep, diet, and exercise. We make so many choices during our day, not necessarily helpful ones. We are often unaware of our triggers, and get carried away by strong emotional reactions. Such reactions can be a cue that we need to look at our toolkit, building a list of strategies that we can use for managing stress and challenging emotions, so that sometimes we can realize that we have choices, and we can choose to do something to help ourselves.

By trying to be mindful and present in our decisions we can make more care-full choices, and notice the opportunities, rather than just reacting. If we notice our thoughts and preambles, we can choose more helpful alternatives, or at least try to stay open to possibilities.

Being mindful doesn’t mean that I don’t wake up tired and sore sometimes, but if I notice that I feel crummy and cranky on the way to work, I can take the opportunity to do some slow breathing at the red light, (EYES OPEN), or pay attention to the colors of the sunrise. It doesn’t mean that my fatigue and pain disappear, but it might mean that I can choose to

reset how I want to enter my workday, by acknowledge it, but deciding to pay less attention to it, or stretching, or by focusing on something more pleasing.

Mindfulness isn't about not having feelings. As I tell people, even the Dalai Lama gets angry so he says, and I've read that Mother Theresa could be a real bitch. We learn to label emotions as good or bad. Some feelings are easier or more pleasant to experience, but **all emotions are a source of information for us.** If we can try not to be afraid of them, avoid them or distract ourselves, but try to learn to observe ourselves in feelings, we can learn to use them as a source of information. In paying attention to what we are feeling, we can sometimes make choices about how much weight or time we want to give to a certain feeling. Most of us drive regularly. Do I really want to experience road rage on a regular basis? Can I choose to switch my attention to the song on the radio? How much energy is being frustrated at the line-up at the grocery store worth? Can I use it as an opportunity to do a few minutes of breath work, or maybe chat with the person behind me?

We worry, we invest lots of energy in fear and worry, which often detracts from whatever is going on now, and possibly something we could enjoy. I don't pretend that it is always easy not to worry, but is driving myself crazy while I'm waiting for the outcome of lab tests or surgery going to change or improve the possible outcome?

I was privileged to do palliative work, spending time with people who were dying, for whom there were no further available treatments towards cure. My husband said I was never so spiritually alive as when I did that work, because for me, part of the blessing of doing palliative work was that it served to remind me that the only moment that we know for sure that we have is THIS one. So what do I want to do with this NOW? Or this one? Or this one?

So in learning to pay attention to where our thoughts go, and what stories we tell ourselves and believe in, we can try to make space. We can try to try to catch ourselves, to notice when we are struggling and suffering, and to try to be aware and make choices toward self-care and calm., We can learn to spend more time in the present , to notice what is good, and to appreciate it.