

Mindfulness, Stress Reduction and Emotion Management

Adapted from A Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Handbook, Stahl and Goldstein, 2010

Sources of stress

We all have stress and it comes from different and sometimes many sources. Some of the sources of stress are:

- 1) Everyday stress – getting out the door in the morning, paying bills on time, putting kids to bed etc. All the things that have to happen for us to function.
- 2) Special circumstances – death in the family, pandemic, divorce, sick child or relative, moving.
- 3) Existential stress – Am I where I should be? Is my life meaningful?
- 4) Anxiety from these and other sources.
- 5) Relationships – both positive and negative stress
- 6) Work – too much to do, dissatisfaction, job loss, starting a new job.
- 7) Past trauma.

If you aren't tuned into your sources of stress, take a moment and write down current stresses. Notice the number and intensity of the stress. Don't forget positive changes or events, even these can bring on stress.

Many of us have a great amount of stress daily. Work, parenting, COVID-19, caring for aging family etc. Stress cause hormones to be released in the brain. This can trigger the fight/flight/freeze/fawn response. This can cause our brain to stay in hypervigilance, a state of high alert, tense muscles, inability to relax. This state is detrimental to our health.

How we respond to stress

Jon Kabat-Zinn has studied stress and developed the idea that there are stress reactions and stress responses. Stress reactions are our habitual, often unconscious ways of trying to handle stress and may include unhealthy habits such as smoking, substance use, over working etc. These are again, harmful to our mental and physical health. Stress responses are planned, healthier ways to respond to stress: exercise, good diet, good sleep etc. Mindfulness can be a great addition to these positive strategies.

Specifically, there are several things that may happen to you when you are stressed:

- 1) Anxiety.
- 2) Negative self-talk, self-criticism.
- 3) Different ways and patterns of thought:
 - a. Catastrophizing: we expect disaster and imagine the worst possible outcome.
 - b. Exaggerating the negative and minimizing the positive: positive experiences are downplayed and negative experiences are exaggerated.

- c. The “shoulds”: I should be better at my job, parenting, running etc. I shouldn’t have forgotten that appointment, etc.
 - d. Blaming others or situations rather than seeing one’s part in something. This can lead to a sense of helplessness – “if the problem is outside me, there’s nothing I can do to change it.”
- 4) Emotions can become intense and you might remember painful past experiences, which further complicates things.

Reacting vs. responding:

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/focus-forgiveness/201609/react-vs-respond>

A reaction is instant. It’s driven by the beliefs, biases, and prejudices of the unconscious mind. When you say or do something “without thinking,” that’s the unconscious mind running the show. A reaction is based in the moment and doesn’t take into consideration long term effects of what you do or say. A reaction is survival-oriented and on some level a defense mechanism. It might turn out okay but often a reaction is something you regret later.

A response on the other hand usually comes more slowly. It’s based on information from both the conscious mind and unconscious mind. A response will be more “ecological,” meaning that it takes into consideration the well-being of not only you but those around you. It weighs the long-term effects and stays in line with your core values.

How do you cope with stress?

There is a spectrum of stress coping strategies that are more or less “healthy.” Coping strategies are anything you do to manage the thoughts, emotions and body sensations related to stress. Strategies range from exercise, meditation, connecting with others to using alcohol and/or drugs, isolation, working long hours etc. Take a moment and write down what strategies you use. Then reflect on your choices, as non-judgmentally as you can: are your choices short term, get through the moment things that may be functional but in the long run aren’t the best! Or are you using strategies that work on the moment and are functional and sustainable?

Some of the best stress coping strategies are preventive: enough sleep, good diet and exercise. Mindfulness is a positive strategy that is both effective in the moment and a good long-term strategy.

The hierarchy approach to stress management

Mindfulness can be something you practice regularly each day. It can also be used in moments of stress. When you are stressed or upset one approach to try is what I call “The Steps of Stress Management in the Moment.” If you are stressed or anxious try these steps:

- 1) Cognitive approach: use self-talk (use your inner voice) to reassure yourself that "I'm safe," "I can handle _____ situation", "I've handled things like _____ in the past and I can handle it now."
- 2) Do the "Mindful Check-in."
- 3) Do "The 4 questions"

The mindful check-in is a 3-minute mindfulness practice.

Find the quietest place available. Sit down. Close your eyes if you'd like or keep them partly open.

Begin slow breaths. Notice your breath on the inhale, going into your body. Then notice the exhale as the air leaves your lungs. Take a few slow breaths. Next notice your body, are parts of your body tense, are parts relaxed, are parts sore? Thoughts may come into your mind. This is normal. Notice the thoughts and then let them go. Notice if there is judgement that goes along with any of the thoughts. Judgement is common for many people, note it and let it go by clearing your mind. One person I know visualizes her thought as words going right to left in front of her eyes. Then the words "scroll off" your vision. She says this helps her let go of thoughts.

Do this for 3 minutes.

Once you have done the Mindful check-in notice how you feel. Try and become aware of the source of your stress and what emotions you are feeling. Am I feeling worried because I haven't gotten that task at work done? Am I sad because my son didn't play well at his baseball game over the weekend? Am I upset about the fight I just had with my partner? If you are able to become aware of the emotion(s) you can try and respond to what's really going on. You can offer yourself reassurance and make a plan of how to get the work task done. You can feel the sadness about your son and decide how to support him.

The Four questions:

Adapted from *The Gift of Our Compulsions: A Revolutionary Approach to Self-Acceptance and Healing*, by Mary O'Malley, New World Library, Novato, CA, 2004

"We need to learn how to be in a new relationship with our compulsions (emotions). We have been taught to dominate them, only to have them dominate us. And if we do control one, another seems to take us over. We stop smoking and we find ourselves overeating. We let go of drinking, and we end up shopping. We try to think positive thoughts to stop our worrying, and we find our to-do lists taking over our lives..."

"What we fight controls us. What we resist, persists."

"There is another way of working with compulsions. This new way is about being curious rather than controlling and about responding rather than reacting. Our compulsions(emotions) thrive

in reaction. They heal in response. They won't let go until they teach us how to engage with them, giving them the attention and the compassion, they need to heal."

For the most part, we can control our actions, we can't control our thoughts, emotions, or body sensations. Trying to control the uncontrollable usually makes matters worse. The four questions are designed to enable you to be present in a different way with a feeling that you would ordinarily try to control.

The Four Questions:

1. In this moment, what am I experiencing in my emotions and in my body? Think of these feelings as signals from a part of you that needs your attention.
2. For this moment, can I let this experience be here without trying to get rid of it, without criticizing it, and without criticizing myself for having it? This is a part of you that is coming forward for healing. Find out if you can give 30 seconds of attention with pushing it away or judging it.
3. For this moment, can I touch the experience with compassion? Can I allow myself to show compassion or mercy to the part of myself that is suffering?
4. Right now, what do I truly need? What does this suffering part really need from you at this moment?

The best time to use the four questions is whenever you become aware of a feeling you do not want or an action you may regret. To use the example of wanting to stop smoking, you may use the four questions at any point in the "wave of compulsion": when you have the urge to smoke, while you are smoking or after you smoke. Usually people are best able to start using the four questions at the end of the wave, with the regret. Gradually, you can work up to using the four questions earlier in the cycle.

You can do the four questions as often as you have unpleasant feelings and can find about two minutes for yourself. The practice is quick, deceptively simple and very powerful.

Notes on the Four Questions:

Question one is designed "to pull out attention out of the story in our heads so we can see what is going on right now." Finding a few simple words for the physical and emotional feelings allows a little bit of room for you to step back and work with the feelings rather than being immersed in them.

You may need many tries before you are able to show yourself 5 - 30 seconds of acceptance at Question Two. Its intent is to help you be able to experience your emotions without pushing them away of ignoring them.