

Reducing Stress, Living Fully --- David Tate, Ph.D.

Stress: *Stressors* are rooted in the physical, material, external, while the experience of emotional/mental *stress* is, in essence, internal. Lazarus defines stress as "a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is *appraised* by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being" (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). One could say, "Stress arises when we *resist what is!*" or, "*Stress is our resistance to the way things are!*"

The next time you're feeling "stressed" ask yourself, "What am I resisting?" or "Who am I resisting?" as a way of looking into the mirror that can show you how to become free from this inner reactivity, free from your suffering. The obvious, albeit not easy, solution to becoming free from stress is to stop resisting the way things are. This is not an argument for complacency, rather for wisdom; to cultivate the wisdom to discern the things we can *and* want to change from the things we can't change, or don't want to expend the energy trying to change (i.e., AA's Serenity Prayer). This approach to life was observed by Dominique LaPierre while living amongst the poorest of the poor in the slums of Calcutta, India. He documented in his book, The City of Joy (1985), his observations of individuals finding peace and joy in life and relationships in spite of destitute conditions. Likewise, the Jewish psychiatrist Viktor Frankl powerfully portrayed in his book on Logotherapy, Man's Search for Meaning (1963), his observations of fellow prisoners in a World War II Nazi concentration camp finding ways to rise up to the enormous challenge of these dire circumstances. Through maintaining their own integrity, discovering moments of gratitude, humor, and delight in nature and art, and serving each other, they found meaning and joy in their lives. As Frankl discovered, there is "meaning in suffering" and "love is the ultimate and highest goal to which man can aspire." He concluded, "everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms--to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way" (p.58-59, 104-106). If inner peace can be experienced under such severe external stressors our common human potential suggests it can be so in our lives.

As stressors present themselves in *our* daily lives, if we find ourselves reacting to them, then we, too, have an opportunity to learn how to cultivate inner peace and joy. Our unpleasant emotions and internal conflict become teachers to us, the means by which we work toward changing our *state* of mind and, with practice, gradually developing attitudinal shifts that become *traits*, or ways of being. One of the founders of the Harvard Mind/Body Medicine Clinic, Joan Borysenko, captures the essence of this approach in the title of her superb book, Guilt is the Teacher, Love is the Lesson (1990). We can substitute stress, fear, anger, sadness, or any emotion; they are all potentially teachers of love as we learn to let go of the underlying resistance and open ourselves up to what can be learned from these reactions and experiences. A willingness to learn and grow is central to love, as Dr. Scott Peck defines it in his best-selling book, The Road Less Traveled, "Love is the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's growth." This decision to make the effort to nurture growth takes the form of *constructively expressing* instead of avoiding our emotions.

From a health measures perspective, "experts now believe that 60 to 90 percent of all doctor visits involve stress-related complaints." A primary reason is that we have not learned adequately how to *constructively express* our emotions, but rather tend to *avoid* feeling unpleasant emotions through innumerable ways (e.g., work and "productivity," alcohol, food, sex, television, internet, video games, reading), none of which are inherently bad, but can be easily misused as an avoidance mechanism instead of addressing the real need.

Constructively expressing and working with emotions- There are many ways to express emotions, but the key is that they be *expressed*, and in *constructive*, rather than destructive, ways. Furthermore, our intention needs to become one of letting go of the internal reactivity and nurturing our growth and well-being through the process, even if it doesn't begin that way. The following ways, if used with these intentions, can be effective alone in reducing stress, and often even more effective if combined: 1) talking or writing about our feelings; 2) more direct physical expressions such as crying, exercising or other constructive physical exertion to help release intense feelings; 3) massage or other body work/therapy; 4) drawing, painting, using music, or other creative means of self expression; 5) "energy work," such as acupuncture/pressure, craniosacral therapy, or zero balancing; 6) prayer, forgiveness, and other spiritual practices; 7) diaphragmatic breathing, breathing exercises and yoga; 8) hypnotherapy and its variations, e.g., NLP; 9) guided imagery and visualization; 10) biofeedback; 11) progressive muscle relaxation, autogenic training, and bodyscan techniques; 12) Qigong, Tai Chi, and other martial arts and

movement meditations (e.g., walking, dancing, any body movement done mindfully); 13) "healthy pleasures" such as laughter, aromatherapy, mindful eating, listening to relaxing music/sounds, caring for pets, being in nature, etc., and, of course, good nutrition, exercise and rest; 14) meditation, including variations such as walking meditation, including labyrinths; 15) dream work; and 16) professional counseling (e.g., cognitive behavioral therapy has been shown in different studies to be at least as effective in preventing panic attacks as medication, and without the side-effects).

To maximize the benefit of these efforts we can consciously engage in what these tools or methods implicitly invite, giving our full attention to our moment-to-moment experience without resisting it, i.e., mindfully. It can feel like a daunting undertaking, and it does require the courage to open to your experiences, but as psychiatrist and mindfulness teacher Mark Epstein, M.D., observed:

The most basic fear experienced by people coming to see me for therapy is of being overwhelmed by the force of their own emotions if they relax the grip of their egos. They fear that if they give up control, they will lose control; that their unconscious will, if given a chance, rise up and inundate them....It is my experience that emotions, no matter how powerful, are not overwhelming if given room to breathe. Contained within the vastness of awareness, our emotions have the power to connect us with each other rather than driving us apart. Mindfulness can serve as a vehicle for desensitizing ourselves to our fears of our own feelings, breaking down the self imposed barriers that keep us at a distance, not just from each other, but from ourselves... (Going to Pieces Without Falling Apart, 1998)

Speaking of the tool of mindfulness meditation, psychologist Jack Kornfield observed:

As we heal through meditation, our hearts break open to feel fully. Powerful feelings, deep unspoken parts of ourselves arise, and our task in meditation is first to let them move through us, then to recognize them and allow them to sing their songs. A poem by Wendell Berry illustrates this beautifully.

*I go among trees and sit still.
All my stirring becomes quiet
Around me like circles on water.
My tasks lie in their places
Where I left them, asleep like cattle...*

*Then what I am afraid of comes.
I live for a while in its sight.
What I fear in it leaves it,
And the fear of it leaves me.
It sings, and I hear its song.*

What we find as we listen to the songs of our rage or fear, loneliness or longing, is that they do not stay forever. Rage turns into sorrow; sorrow turns into tears; tears may fall for a long time, but then the sun comes out. A memory of old loss sings to us; our body shakes and relives the moment of loss; then the armor around that loss gradually softens; and in the midst of the song of tremendous grieving, the pain of that loss finally finds release....When we truly come to terms with sorrow, a great and unshakable joy is born in our heart. (A Path with Heart, 1993)

These emotions often arise in the context of **interpersonal relationships**. They are a primary stressor for most of us and are potentially powerful teachers, what we might call, "in your face meditation." As meditation teacher Charlotte J. Beck said, relationships "help us see where we're stuck and what we're holding on to. As long as our buttons are pushed, we have a great chance to learn and grow. So a relationship is a great gift, not because it makes us happy--it often doesn't--but because any intimate relationship, if we view it as practice, is the clearest mirror we can find." (Mariechild, Open Mind, 1995) Dr. Dean Ornish, the physician who first demonstrated that heart disease could be reversed through lifestyle changes alone (e.g., meditation, yoga, exercise, diet, etc.), concluded in his review of extensive research, "I am not aware of any other factor in medicine--not diet, not smoking, not exercise, not stress, not genetics, not drugs, not surgery--that has a greater impact on our quality of life, incidence of illness, and premature death from all causes than loneliness and isolation" vs. love and authentic intimacy. He concludes in his book, Love and Survival: The Scientific Basis for the Healing Power of Intimacy (1999): Love is the most powerful force in health and healing and in reducing fear and stress.

Other BOOKS & RESOURCES:

Borysenko, Joan -A Woman's Book of Life. Kabat-Zinn, Jon -Full Catastrophe Living; Wherever You Go, There You Are: Everyday Blessings; Coming to Our Senses; see mindfulnessstapes.com for meditation CDs & www.umassmed.edu/ cfm for nearest mindfulness-based stress reduction course; Katie, Byron -Loving What Is; I Need Your Love -- Is That True?; see www.thework.org. Ornstein, Robert & Sobel, David -Healthy Pleasures. Prather, Hugh -How to Live in the World and Still Be Happy; Riso, Don -The Wisdom of the Enneagram. See enneagraminstitute .com; enneagram.net; Tolle, Eckhart -The Power of Now: A New Earth. Welwood, John -Love and Awakening; Perfect Love. Imperfect Relationships. Wilber, Ken - Integral Spirituality; kenwilber.com