



Stress Without Distress – Revisited

by JUDY BERANGER

How often do you hear someone say, “I’m stressed out!”? Do you ever say it? What does it mean? Often times it can mean “I’m having a challenging/difficult time right now”. In my article in the January/February issue of *The Bulletin* we explored some ideas and tips for maintaining health and managing stress levels. Central among these was the importance of addressing stress before it turned to distress in the body, often with debilitating consequences. In this article suggested guidelines to manage stress will be discussed along with more ideas to add to your stress management toolbox. Stress can be harmful, but it cannot be avoided. The challenge for us is to learn how we can keep our response to stress within a manageable range so that it is motivating and healthful.

All behaviour has meaning leading to either heightened or reduced stress. On some level, whether it is conscious or not, everything we do makes sense to us. The meaning we give to our own behaviour, and that of others, will ultimately determine the level of stress we experience. The following story is a good illustration:

Three loving and good-natured sons inherited their father’s herd of 17 horses with the eldest son receiving 1/2 of the herd, the middle son, 1/3 and the youngest son, 1/9. The sons were frustrated as to why their father divided his herd this way as it seemed impossible to follow these instructions without destroying a horse. This caused much quarrelling and disagreement. Since their father’s death the three sons had become quite stressed, secretly harbouring unkind thoughts about their father and about each other. The sons agreed to seek the advice of a highly respected and knowledgeable teacher. The teacher agreed to think about a solution to their dilemma. She visited a few days later bringing along a horse of her own to add to the father’s herd thereby increasing its size to 18. She then directed the sons to divide the horses according to their father’s will. The eldest son received his nine horses, the middle son his six and the youngest his two. In accordance with the father’s wishes 17 horses were distributed leaving one to be taken back by the wise

teacher! The sons were astonished and grateful, realizing they had been so busy reacting negatively to the problem that they had stopped looking for a creative solution. The wise teacher further suggested that the father may have tried to inspire one last lesson as he departed from this world. Focusing on solutions instead of the problem reduces stress and heightens creativity.

Stress is often equated to the strings on a violin. If the strings are stretched too tightly, the tone of the violin is sharp – just as people can be. If they are too loose, the sound is flat and lifeless. As teachers, we know how much and what type of stress is good for us. Playing music might be a wonderful stress reducer for some, while creating stress for others who might prefer jogging and playing sports. It is when the body starts sending signals and we feel uneasy, tense and irritable with difficulty sleeping or concentrating we know that our level of stress is threatening our health. That is when the strings need to be tuned properly. Just as we can play well with the right amount of tension of the strings, so too can we function well with the right amount of stress.

Of course there are times in our lives where fine tuning our reactions to stress seems impossible. Losing someone we love, for example, is the ultimate crisis and stress and one which will take whatever time it takes to move forward. We crawl our way through these times, seek supports, do the best we can and know the secret is in the crawling, not giving up.

Heartbeat Rate Can Compromise Hearing/Listening Ability

Have you ever dealt with a situation at school when you became quite upset but didn’t take any time to distance yourself for objective thinking time? In a twenty-year study, researcher and psychologist, Dr. John Gottman, observed heart rhythms and blood pressure on couples engaged in tense conversations. He determined that a normal heartbeat of 82 beats per minute for women and 76 beats for men can increase up to 165 beats per minute when experiencing feelings of risk of harm. Gottman says that after

your heartbeat goes above 100 beats per minute you will not hear what the person to whom you are talking is saying. It was also found that when subjects just imagined the sense of someone they didn't like for five minutes their immune systems were suppressed for up to six hours. Reducing inflammatory and negative thinking significantly reduces stress levels in the body.

Guidelines and Activities To Manage Stress

Here are some guidelines on how you can manage stress on a daily basis:

- Identify and list irritants in your environment and get rid of whatever annoyances you can;
- Remove yourself from stressful situations as long as removing yourself is not more stressful than the condition you are trying to avoid;
- Change your reaction to stress by changing your thinking, words, attitudes and decisions;
- When possible, confront the stress head on;
- Keep moving, find ways that work for you to remove tension from your body and remember – regular practice is the challenge and the solution.

Further activities and techniques to add to your stress reduction toolbox:

1. Imagery can work for a relaxation technique. Close your eyes, relax, breathe, and use your imagination to visualize and feel the place you enjoy or would most like to be.
2. Peripheral vision exercise for quick relaxation. Sitting in a relaxed position, pick a spot in front of you relaxing your eyes and looking straight ahead. Without moving your eyes focus for a few minutes on what you can see in your peripheral vision.
3. Think of a recent stressful event. What did you think during and after the event. How did you feel? Is there anything you could have done differently?
4. Practice frowning for a few minutes. Next practice smiling – a big smile showing all your teeth. Did you notice any change in how you felt? If you are around a person who seems “down a quart” try smiling a little, keeping the conversation upbeat and see if you notice any change.
5. List any bad habits that come to mind. (lucky you if you can't think of any) Consider reducing or eliminating at least one of them.
6. At least once a week tell someone out loud some of the nice things you are thinking about them.
7. Spend time with friends where you feel safe and can be real.
8. Develop some personal mantras to replace unhelpful thoughts that may creep in from time to time. Practice a focusing phrase to repeat when the alternative is inflammatory thinking. “I want to

make what difference I can in the lives of my family, students/colleagues today” is much better than “I can't manage all that is being put on me today, always something new coming down and I'm fed up with it.”

A sense of purpose is critical to managing stress. When we lose sight of it we are likely to experience heightened stress. A teacher once told me he felt like he was walking a tightrope. Between family and school there seemed to be little, if any, down time. Like the ebb and flow of life, the rope moves, drops, sags, tightens and all the while you have to remain focused to keep that one foot on the rope while moving the other foot in front of the other. He came to realize that the balancing pole used by tightrope walkers for stabilizing was similar to the power of his own thinking. When he concentrated on what he could do, what he wanted to achieve and gave it his best, it kept him balanced and less stressed. He was startled to realize how much his inflammatory thinking had affected his ability to act in a focused way to reach his goals. He learned first-hand how all behavior has meaning. Each one of us has the capacity to change our thinking and manage our stress. It is all a matter of choice. What we choose to do and to think either works for us or against us.

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Be careful with what you water your dreams. Water them with worry and fear and you will produce weeds that choke the life from your dreams. Water them with optimism and solutions and you will cultivate success. Always be on the lookout for ways to turn problems and challenges into opportunities for success. Always be on the lookout for ways to nurture your dreams.

~ Lao Tzu