

## Responding to Stress

Today is the fourteenth in a series of articles on mindfulness. To review, mindfulness is a form of stress reduction. In the simplest terms, mindfulness is paying attention to the present moment without judgment. It focuses our attention on the only moment in which we are alive, which is right now. Paying attention in this way can reduce stress, depression, anxiety and even potentially bring about healing. Today I will explore the benefits of mindfulness in teaching how to respond rather than react to stress.

Before I do that, I have two quick announcements. First is that my web site at [www.drmcquaid.com](http://www.drmcquaid.com) has been updated to include the most recent articles on mindfulness. There are now over 40 articles posted on stress reduction and 13 dedicated to mindfulness. I would encourage a review of the articles as they can help integrate the lesson discussed today. The second announcement is to let readers know that I will be interviewed at 2:00 pm Dec. 15 on local radio station KPFZ 88.1 FM. This will be a great opportunity to gain clarity on all of the stress reduction ideas covered in my articles.

For most people, stress reduction programs and techniques are attractive. There is a natural curiosity about how to deal effectively with stress because it is a component to being human. We live in a time of high stress and most people understand it is important to learn how to protect oneself from its adverse consequences.

There seems to be no aspect of life that is spared from stressful events. It can seem to come from everywhere including work, finances, time pressures, body appearance, loss or grief, and relationships. All of these examples and many others can be trigger points for stress. In the work setting, the highest stress comes from jobs in which you have the least degree of decision making; but the highest degree of responsibility. I personally know this all too well as a doctor because I have a high level of responsibility but no control of health insurance policy or regulatory decisions.

The adverse effects of stress usually end up impacting the body in some way. One of the signs that suggest stress is overwhelming is if you have trouble sleeping. Other signs include elevated blood pressure, upset stomach, pain in joints, heart palpitations, or just generalized tension in the solar plexus. The last aspect to mention and likely the most difficult is how stress causes negative emotions. Fear, anxiety, and depression are sure signs that stress is getting the upper hand in your life.

Bestselling author Dr. Wayne Dyer said, “There is no stress in the world, only people thinking stressful thoughts.” What Dyer is saying is that it is not the stress per se, but how you relate to it. The value of mindfulness in stress reduction is that it gives us options and choices for handling stress in a healthier way. Mindfulness teaches you coping skills that can minimize the adverse effects of stress. The utility of mindfulness is the understanding between responding to stress and reacting to stress.

When we are reacting to stress we are unconscious. When we respond to stress we are using conscious awareness to increase our capacity for coping through various options

and possibilities. With mindfulness techniques, responding to stress becomes a choice. The key to responding rather than reacting to stress is to not resist the sensations. This is not easy to do. What I encourage you to try is to allow the experience to be as it is without trying to change it. Responding means to embrace whatever is coming up in the mind or body and be willing to let it be even if it is uncomfortable. Mindfulness responds to fear by acknowledging it, not resisting it.

For instance, if you become afraid, you would say to yourself mindfully, “Oh, so this is what fear feels like. Ok, I am now in fear and I will let it be as it is.” When we allow ourselves to be with discomfort we reduce our resistance which paradoxically resolves it. We are letting it run its course without resistance, which decompresses the sensations and miraculously, they dissipate. This is responding by choice rather than automatic reacting. The last additional component is to breathe while you experience out the discomfort.

You can think about this advice as homework. Moving in closer to the sensations of stress and not resisting them is your assignment. It is like asking you to dance with your mind and body while you breathe. This will take courage, but you make a decision before a stressful event that you can navigate through whatever happens. You make a declaration ahead that you can manage the triggers of life. So the next time you get stressed out, don't run away, move into it and be present as best as you can. Chances are you will discover for yourself the miracle of mindfulness.

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