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Mediating Stress with Mindfulness

Skills and Professional Development



So, you have been working from home for months now, and it is starting to get to you.

Or at least, something is. The COVID-19 pandemic, the social unrest, the state of the global economy, the close quarters, the uncertainty, the drive to get all your work done and take care of your family or friends — these are all taking a toll. You know this, but you aren't sure what you can do about it. You aren't even sure what that toll is. But you are certain you are paying it because you feel agitated and irritable and not able to relate to yourself and others the way you want or used to.

You have tried to exercise, to eat better, to get enough sleep, to relax. These things help, but you can tell that you are starting to fray at the edges. You want to calm down so you can be a better member of your household, a better lawyer for your company. Happier even. What is going on, and what can you do about it?

There is no escaping the fact that these are difficult times. We are in the midst of an extraordinary crisis. Or many crises. The normal human state in times like these is anxiety and stress. So, your feelings are entirely normal. But not necessarily helpful. What can you do to make yourself better than “normal,” to rise above the situation?

First, you must acknowledge that these are strange times and that you need to cut yourself some slack. You cannot expect yourself to “calm down” simply by force of will. In fact, trying to force

yourself to calm down will only make you more stressed. You would simply be bottling up your emotions, and we all know that filling a bottle with too much of anything under pressure risks making the bottle explode.

Amygdala hijack

Let's take a step back and see if there are any insights that may help. We are, after all, the products of our evolution as a species. Long ago, we and most other animals developed attributes to help us survive in difficult situations. You have heard of the "fight or flight" response to danger.

That reaction takes place in a part of our brain called the amygdala.¹ When we are confronted by danger, the amygdala triggers the release of adrenalin and cortisol, which in turn trigger our hearts and other muscles to feel full of energy and the tension we need to react physically to that danger.

But what happens when a physical reaction isn't the right response? The amygdala is a blunt instrument. It didn't develop the ability to differentiate between dangers for which fight or flight are not the appropriate response.

In our present situation, we quite understandably feel as though we are in a constant state of risk, so our amygdalas are in a constant state of hyper-stimulation. The adrenalin and cortisol get all dressed up with nowhere to go. They make us feel edgy and anxious, even hair-trigger. This can cause us to react in ways we later come to regret, in what is sometimes referred to as an "[amygdala hijack](#)."

Thalamic pause

But, in addition to the amygdala, humans also developed the frontal cortex and thalamus, parts of the brain that allow for thought and executive functioning. These are the parts that allow humans to compensate for and even override the amygdala, to apply reasoning to a situation and respond to it in more nuanced ways.

With training, we can even learn to monitor and adjust the way the amygdala reacts so that we come to be aware of the stress, the anxiety, and the potential for a hair-trigger response, and instead respond to them in ways that are less harmful to us or our relationships. We may even learn to release our tensions in a safer and more pleasant way.

The first step is becoming consciously aware of the stress and accepting it is an inevitable part of life. We know that change creates uncertainty, and uncertainty makes people uncomfortable and stressed. Since we are in a period of more change and uncertainty than usual, we are also experiencing more stress. But simply understanding this is so is not enough. We need to lean into the stress, experiencing it on a somatic, not just an intellectual, level.

The best way to do this is the practice of mindfulness meditation. It's essentially taking a break to consciously feel the stress, acknowledge it, and allow ourselves to experience its physical manifestations in our bodies and minds. With practice, we can come to be fully aware of our mostly circular worries about the past and future that constantly manifest in the undercurrents of our thoughts.

We cannot avoid these undercurrents. They are evolutionarily programmed into the way our minds work. They are designed to help with our survival so we can learn from past mistakes and plan for the

future. But too often, they become unconscious, repetitive, and obsessive. They trigger our amygdalas over and over, well past the point of diminishing returns.

Mindfulness meditation can gradually make us aware of these thoughts, as well as their physical manifestations. Awareness will give your thalamus the space to stop and mediate your amygdala response so that you can react more thoughtfully.

This is sometimes referred to as a “thalamic pause.”

Have you ever reacted to a situation or something someone has said and immediately regretted it, but then been so caught up in the moment that you then escalated the problem by doubling down on the very thing you just regretted? What if you had been able to stop yourself, to pause before that first reaction, and say something more thoughtful, kind, or understanding?

This is one of the principal goals of mindfulness meditation — to intermedate your responses by making you more aware of what your amygdala and unconscious mind are doing, thereby allowing you to respond thoughtfully rather than reactively.

Mediating with meditation

The first, critical step in meditation is to become aware of the way your mind works. It is always being buffeted, not only by the currents you are aware of but also by those undercurrents that are sub-conscious. Over time, meditation allows you to develop the ability to become aware of all of those thoughts, and to choose not to feed energy to the ones that don't serve a useful purpose.

For example, dwelling on things over which you have no control is not useful. All it does is trigger the opportunity for an amygdala hijack, which in turn creates more stress and anxiety.

A great way to break the cycle is to focus on feeling how the fear or anxiety manifests on a physical level: Where do you feel it? Your belly or chest? Then notice that because you aren't feeding it, the feeling dissipates on its own as it loses energy.

Another good practice is to cultivate compassion for the people around you, who are also feeling fear and stress. Can you help them in some way? This will take the energy in your fear and convert it into something productive and make you feel happier.

Over time, mindfulness can become ingrained in the ways you react to difficult situations. You can learn to experience gratitude for the good things in your life rather than dwelling on the difficult things. You can come to realize that our natural tendencies to react to change with anxiety is not very helpful in a world that is, no matter how hard we may try to deny it, constantly changing. You can learn that allowing yourself to feel the stress with awareness actually makes the stress a less powerful factor in the way you react to life.

You can hone your mind's natural curiosity about things and explore your reactions in a way that feels interesting and even gratifying. In this extraordinarily stressful time, it can allow you to be more comfortable in our current situation, and even be happier. Because no matter how bad our situation may seem, we are alive right now, and life is a wonderful thing.

There are myriad resources these days for learning mindfulness meditation, and I highly recommend that you give some of them a try. Our world can certainly use more mindful people. And you could

use a break from some of the stress.

Further Reading

1 A major part of the limbic system, our so-called “lizard brain” because it developed so far down the evolutionary ladder.

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