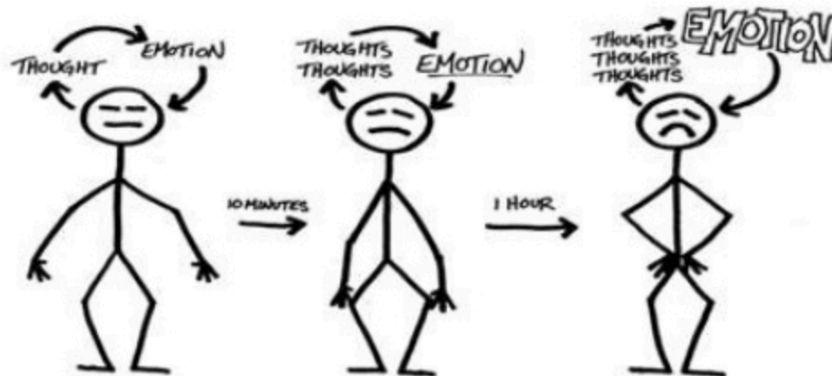


Week 3: Responding to stress

STRESS LOOPS



The easiest way to relax is to stop trying to make things different.
Struggle comes from not accepting what is present

What is stress?

Each of us is subject much of the time to a changing set of stressors – events that produce stress. These may be external, in the form of the biological, physical, social, economic and political forces that impinge from outside; or they may be internal – the difficult thoughts and feelings that arise in all of us from time to time. There is nothing wrong with having these difficult thoughts and feelings. We all do, and we're not to blame for them. But we *can* learn to do something about them.

The trouble is that we tend to react to stressors, both internal and external, in a way that produces yet more stress.

There are two levels of stressors. The first level comprises all the external and internal pressures that play upon us simply as a part of our being human. Then there are second level stressors that are all internal and largely unconscious, and consist of our stressed reactions to the first level.

In ancient times, people sometimes used powerful darts as a weapon of war. If you were struck by one of them, you really felt it. Taking that as an analogy, the Buddha spoke of two darts. The first dart consists in the suffering that arises just from being human. We often don't get what we want. All too often we instead get what we don't want. And even when we do get what we want, it's impossible to hold onto it forever. That's all part of what it means to be human. But the way in which we usually deal with the pain and difficulty that comes our way causes us to be struck by a second dart - one—that is self-generated.

Human beings tend to react to painful feelings with aversion. That's how we're wired up, we don't like pain, or even discomfort and we spend much of our time trying to rid ourselves of it. To that end, we adopt a variety of strategies, many of them unconscious. In the presence of pain or discomfort we may, for example, tend to tune out and go blank or we may get into fantasies and daydreams. Or else we might go on the attack, giving rise to feelings of anger, or blame. Or we may immediately look about for a fix – 'something must be able to take this pain away – now!' Or else we may grasp for a new, more pleasant experience, to take our pain away.

All of these reactions are ultimately unhelpful. Grasping, blanking, getting angry and so on all produce their own kinds of pain and so a vicious cycle comes into being:

1st Level Stressor – Stress-Reaction – 2nd Level Stressor – Further Stress-Reaction – and so on....

Take for instance an experience that you may be familiar with. You're walking around your home at night, barefoot, without bothering to switch on a light, and you stub your toe, quite painfully, on the heavy briefcase your partner left lying in an unaccustomed place. The first level stressor is the simple physical pain you feel as soon as that happens. But the second level stress kicks in as you go on to tell yourself a story about what happened. Maybe your story is against your partner, how he or she is always so sloppy and inconsiderate. Or maybe it's against yourself – how foolish not to have worn shoes, or not to have turned on the light. Or maybe it's a bit of both. In any event, your body tightens, your brow furrows, and long after the pain has faded you're still involved in the second level stress.

For many people, second level stress of one kind or another marks the whole of their lives, leading to maladaptive coping strategies, such as denial, fantasy, workaholicism, worry, unhelpful rumination, busyness, substance abuse, overeating and so on. Since these are variously ineffective, they contribute to the stress reaction rather than diminish it.

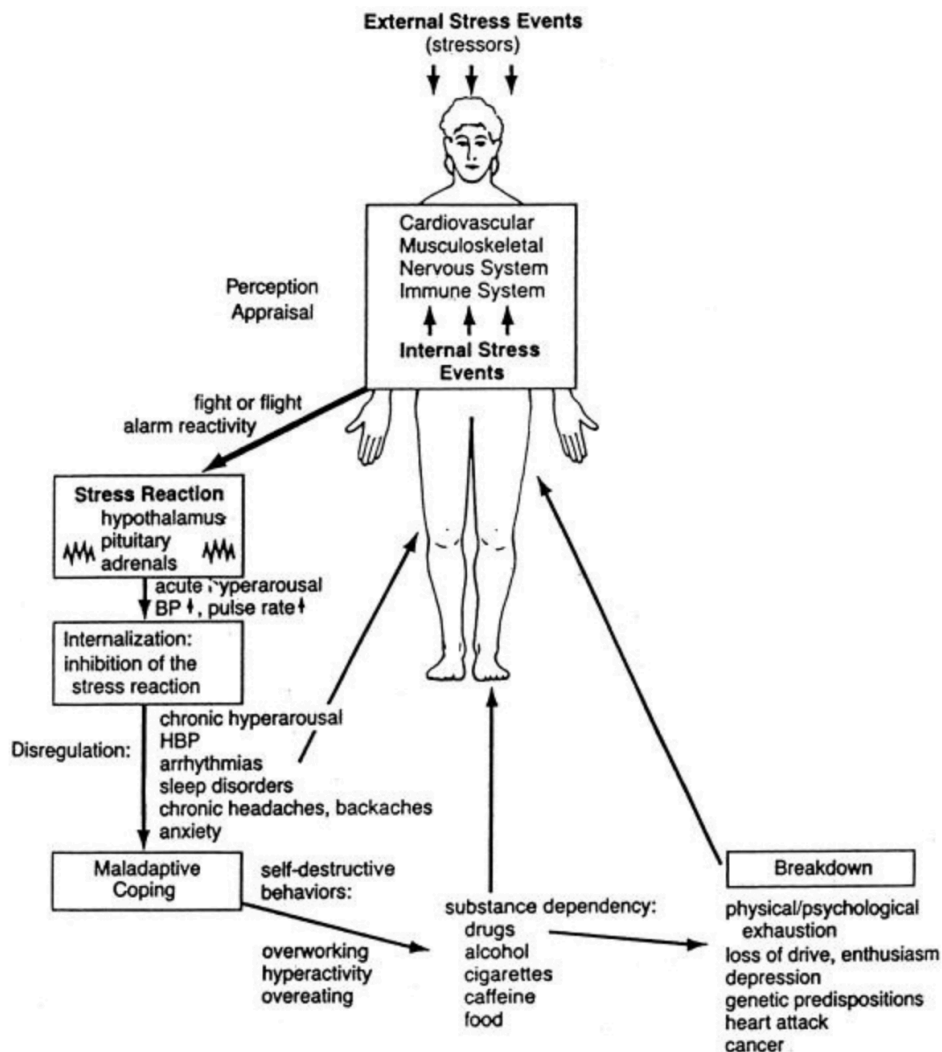
Stress-reactions v. Stress-responses

In mindfulness the core skill is learning to replace unconscious stress reactions with conscious stress responses.

Stressors are unavoidable, but if we respond to them with awareness it is possible to institute adaptive, healthy, coping strategies as opposed to maladaptive ones. Moment-by-moment awareness allows us to exert control and to influence the flow of events at those times where we are most likely to react automatically and so fall into the stress reaction cycle.

Stress reactions, of their nature, happen automatically and mainly unconsciously. By being *aware*, conscious of the situations we find ourselves in, therefore, we immediately change things. This is the deciding factor in whether we go down the path of stress reaction or that of stress response. Remaining centered in the moment of stress, we are able to recognise both

the stressfulness of the situation *and* our impulses to react. Being conscious in the present, we learn to recognise such agitations for what they are. They are not the whole of reality, they are just bundles of passing thoughts, feelings and sensations – and that changes everything.



Taken from: John Kabat Zinn, Full Catastrophe Living

Learning to Respond rather than React

Difficult things are part of life. It is how we handle them that determines the extent to which they rule our lives. We can learn to relate more lightly to them. By becoming more aware of thoughts, feelings and body sensations evoked by events, we can free ourselves from habitual, automatic, ways of reacting and instead, mindfully respond in more skilful ways.

In general, we *react* to experience in one of three ways:

- With indifference – switching out of the present moment and going off somewhere else in our minds.
- With wanting – wishing we were having experiences that we are not having right now, or trying to hold onto experiences that we are having right now.
- With aversion – wanting to get rid of experiences that we are having right now, or trying to avoid experiences that may be coming along that we do not want.

Each of these ways of *reacting* can cause problems, particularly the tendency to react to unpleasant feelings with aversion. The main issue is to become more aware of our experience so that we can *respond* mindfully rather than *react* automatically.

Sitting Meditation can be a kind of laboratory, where, under the particular conditions we have set up, we can become aware of how we tend to react to things and also to begin to see how, instead of reacting, we might begin to do things differently.

Regularly practicing Sitting Meditation gives us many opportunities to notice when we have drifted away from awareness of the moment and, with a friendly awareness, to note whatever it was that took our attention away, gently and firmly bringing our attention back to our focus of attention, reconnecting with moment-by-moment awareness. At other times of day, deliberately using the Breathing Space whenever we notice unpleasant feelings or a sense of tightening or 'holding' in the body, provides an opportunity to begin to respond rather than react.

'Bringing awareness to the elements of events gives more degrees of freedom than is offered by those same events once they have assembled into habitual patterns'
(Williams, 2008, p.730, emphasis in original)

In order to respond, rather than react, we need awareness. Our bodies, with all their present-moment feelings and sensations, are an invaluable anchor for that awareness. They are always there to return to, enabling us to remain focussed in the present moment.

GROUNDING



Staying Present

Remember to use your body as a way to awareness. It can be as simple as staying mindful of your posture. You are probably sitting as you read this. What are the sensations in your body at this moment? When you finish reading and stand, feel the movements of standing, of walking to the next activity, of how you lie down at the end of the day. Be in your body as you move, as you reach for something, as you turn. It is as simple as that.

Just patiently practice feeling what is there – and the body is always there – until it becomes second nature to know even the small movements you make. If you are reaching for something, you are doing it anyway; there is nothing extra you have to do. Simply notice the reaching. You are moving. Can you train yourself to be there, to feel it?

It is very simple, practice again and again bringing your attention back to your body. This basic effort, which paradoxically is a relaxing back into the moment, gives us the key to expanding our awareness from times of formal meditation to living mindfully in the world. Do not underestimate the power that comes to you from feeling the simple movements of your body throughout the day.

Adapted from Joseph Goldstein, Insight Meditation

*The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you
Don't go back to sleep
You must ask for what you really want
Don't go back to sleep
People are going back and forth across the doorsill
Where the two worlds touch
The door is round and open
Don't go back to sleep*

*THE ESSENTIAL RUMI. Translated by Coleman Barks
With John Moyne, Harper: San Francisco, 1995.*

