

Stress in a Holistic Approach

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Stress is a common human reaction to a burden with an individual response.

Stress occurs when we are not present in ourselves, and in what we are doing.

The stress response is the body's physiological response to a burden. An image of how body, mind, consciousness communicate while stressed can be described in the following way:

- The rational mind is able to manage anything the conscience voice tells it to do, and if the lower part of the body entirely follows this master, the body might push itself, or allow itself to be pushed, until it finally responds with a symptom.
- The entire body has been signalling for a while that it is distressed, but it has been ignored by the rational mind and the heart dares not set the limit, for many different reasons.
- The awareness of all that is going on is absent.
- The conscience voice represents our common cultural and social norms.

In a society that predominately talks to the rational mind, most people mainly experience mental distress. However an increasing number of people know that psyche and body are completely connected and they have realised the emotional and physical distress in their body as well.

Stress is a full-body reaction where the personal thinking patterns in some way are stuck by self-limiting beliefs like "I have to ..." or "I need to ..."; sometimes the individual is even lost in chaotic thoughts. To do by head and rarely by heart leads to unhealthy choices in the long run, not only for ourselves but also for others. We forget to listen to what is really important in life and in this very moment. These thinking patterns are connected to or ruled by fundamental feelings like fear and longing; the fear of losing and the longing to achieve. These feelings are triggered in the middle of the brain in the hypothalamic area and are measurable as the neuron-hormonal response that connects with every organ, the skin organ inclusive, just to remind you about that every specific cell is a part of a specific organ-system.

Often, there are ten balls in the air, and this prevents us from grabbing the only one that should actually be grabbed on that day and in that present situation. Speculation, imagination, and ideas about the past, the future, others, and ourselves may easily drain all our energy. We are mainly ruled by outer circumstances. We are in the mind, and we hardly sense the body which is running behind the head, craving peace and a reduced pace. The craving may be quieted by different stimulants and activities, but it never really gets satisfied.

Indeed, the stress response in the body is very powerful, and the symptom is completely individual, dependent on our personal history and our family history and inheritance. Nevertheless, it is a common human response, which can be compared to the bodily reaction

during fight, flight, or stiffening. The mechanism can also be compared with pressing on the accelerator: Strong pressure on the body's accelerator, as in acute traumatic stress, is a full-body reaction and increases heart rate, blood pressure, blood sugar, and cholesterol; breathing becomes faster and more superficial; the muscles tighten; the skin changes colour and temperature; the digestive, urinary, and sexual systems are altered; and the immune system is on standby. The stress response is triggered by thoughts and emotions in a present moment. Prolonged stress leads to prolonged symptoms or diseases. It is obvious that all organs are involved in the traumatic stress response, so it makes sense to discover, through enquiring, that many of the physical symptoms people may be suffering from are caused by the stress response or even a long-past traumatic event.

An example of this process could be a stressed person who reacts predominately with heart palpitations. If the increased heart rate continues for a longer period, the next symptom may be a cardiac arrhythmia and/or hypertension; further on, it might result in chest pain or cardiac failure or shortness of breath. In this way, any stress symptoms can be extra polarized into a more severe and permanent state, as with any chronic disorders. Persistent stress can lead to persistent suffering and, eventually, permanent loss of function.

Stress is very common in modern society, and on a conscious level and with all respect for the many diseased people; it has been instrumental in opening our eyes to the interconnectedness of body and mind, thus contributing to something good despite the difficulties. For many people, it has even been an eye-opener into the spiritual life, and a greater awareness of our own and our common existence. Thus, it has opened the possibility for us to heal ourselves and each other through the conscious self and a greater awareness that we could call spirit.

In terms of stress, I think lots of people can contribute with a case story, including myself. Here, I just want to describe a situation from daily living to illustrate the continuum in the stress response, as compared to the trauma response and the relaxation response.

Story from Daily Life

A man lies on the couch in his home, sick with the flu, "the mortal form" which women claim men are the only ones to attract. He is sleeping profoundly and sweating heavily. His wife is busy in the kitchen, somewhat annoyed by the situation and thus a bit noisier with the pots and pans, working at a high speed, since their child is crying for food or simply to get her attention. The man lies heavily and sleeps heavily – the only right thing to do, in order for the body to relax and get sufficient peace to heal by itself. Suddenly, he is awakened by a scream and smoke is coming from the kitchen. He jumps up from the sofa and runs into the kitchen. His wife is standing there, surrounded by smoke, and some tiny flames are burning on the stove. She is shocked. The meatballs are burned, as she left them to take care of the child, who needed her attention immediately. The man calms down and the situation gets under control with some water and fresh air, supported by some relieving and comforting words and hugs between the couple. The wife resumes her cooking more quietly, and the child resumes playing more quietly. The man returns silently to the couch and before too long he is heavily sleeping and heavily sweating again.

Physiologically, the man is in a bodily state of relaxation caused by his flu and lying on the couch. Even if we would call him sick, his body is relaxed and on its way to heal, and the immune system works while he is sleeping and sweating. As soon as he detects the scream, the body reacts, as in a traumatic situation, by pressing the accelerator to the floor, so to speak, and forgetting all about healing the flu; the immune system goes on standby because of the protective stress response, which motivates the man to react to the seemingly life-threatening situation. When the situation is under control, together, with mutual and almost silent agreements, all goes back to the way it was before initiation of the acute stress response. The man returns to resting on the couch, and the body resumes its necessary healing process through the relaxation response. Some changes have happened to the woman as well. She was obviously in a stress mode before the incident, according to her noisy work with the pots and pans; afterwards, she becomes quieter and stops scratching with the cookware. The child is sitting quietly, playing by himself, having discovered that there are some dangers in life, like smoke in the kitchen, in more than one sense.

A stressed person may influence everyone in the surroundings, including himself or herself.

In Practical Terms

Stress must be handled very individually, as with any other disease. In general, it is about returning to inner calmness, the inner source; but, first, we must discover that we are stuck on the accelerator. Mindfulness is a way to practise calmness and awareness, because it brings our attention inwardly and towards our thought patterns, emotions, and bodily sensations. Next step is to “walk the talk”; to start living from this calmness and our heartfelt values and supporting each other in doing it.

The article is a chapter from the book “Mindful Medicine” written by Author and MD Mette Mouritsen. www.mettemouritsen.com.

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