



Mindfulness practice in stress management

For those working in a busy NHS hospital, stress can be a very debilitating problem. Stress can affect anyone regardless of position or profession. We are all human and as such experience various emotional states that will give rise to a happy or unhappy state of mind.

Whether working in a busy A&E department or cleaning the floors the demands of the job can have a profound psychological impact in terms of stress. Recent studies have shown that work related stress is widespread in the UK and accounts for over 13 million lost working days every year. Almost 1 in 7 people claim they find their work extremely stressful and 80% of all G.P. visits are stress related and 1 in 6 people claim their work is either very or extremely stressful.

Prolonged exposure to stress will inevitably have an adverse effect upon the immune system resulting in an increase in susceptibility to illness and disease. Therefore, intervention is required that will empower the individual to manage stress more effectively. There are many stress management programs in place, but the most effective are those where individuals take personal responsibility.

Stress, however is in fact, a choice of the individual rather than a predetermined outcome. Through repetitive behavioural responses to specific conditions stress becomes habitual and as with any habitual behaviour, the more we act out the habit, the stronger it becomes.

Patterns of behaviour develop habits that are firmly implanted into our subconsciousness. As soon as we encounter a familiar situation, our habitual responses start almost automatically, but the habits that perpetuate stress are not a permanent feature of our mindset, and can be broken. We can change the pattern of negative response to a more considered and calm approach to stressful situations. This revised attitude develops new behavioural responses that result in new and more positive outcomes.

Much like all habits, they are reinforced through repetition making them difficult to break. This applies to all forms of thinking and people who become stressed by work develop the 'stressful' habit. There have been many occasions when people who are depressed claim that they are strangely content in their familiar habitually depressed state. Becoming angry or frustrated can develop into a 'normal' response for many people.

For example, we may experience stress because of a high workload or interpersonal issues, and so whenever we encounter similar situations, our habitual response will dominate our peace of mind. Instead, we could simply resolve to do the best we can rather than wish for something different. We could adopt the following attitude:

"If I can do something to improve the situation then I must just get on and do it, there is no point in worrying. If nothing can be done to improve a situation then again there is little point in worrying as nothing can be done,"

Using the above approach changes our normal response to something more pragmatic and practical rather than the mental turmoil of worry and unproductive thought processes that are often based more upon fantasy than reality. By fantasy in this context means that we exaggerate the situation to be far worse than it actually is.

Is there an alternative to a stressful response?

Stress is defined as; *'a physical, mental, or emotional response to events that causes bodily or mental tension.'*

Therefore, stress is a mentally originating phenomenon that will also have an effect upon the physical body and can manifest in many forms such as: tension, high blood pressure, frustration, anger, and poor concentration. In the workplace this translates into; inter-personal conflict, depression, lack of motivation, job dissatisfaction, and ineffective productivity.

If the cause of stress is a mental function and this cause can be identified, then the solution to prevent stress from arising must also reside within the mind. This process is termed MINDFULNESS.

The definition of mindfulness is: nonjudgmental, concentrated observation of one's perceptions, thoughts, and emotions in the present moment, with an attitude of equanimity, curiosity, openness, and acceptance.

In essence, it is being aware in the present moment without the usual pre-conceived judgmental ideas and habits that normally cloud that observation. Mindfulness is not some 'new age' fad but a realistic and proven method to become a more balanced and realistic person.

Being mindful therefore is the key to developing a calm and more considered approach to life.

So how is this possible? We cannot just switch on being mindful, but we can begin the process. Every journey begins with one step. The first step is to allow the mind to become more flexible, more open. This can only be achieved through the practice of meditation.



Meditation is an ancient practice dating back many thousands of years. It is a method by which we look internally, instead of externally, for the causes of our wellbeing and happiness. We usually search outside for the things that we think will bring us happiness and contentment, but inevitably if we are unhappy within ourselves, then nothing external will provide us with any long lasting satisfaction. Equally we will blame external events or people for the causes of our unhappiness and stress whereas, in reality, it is our own perceptions and responses that cause our discontent.

We must therefore look for methods that will develop our sense of inner peace and calm. This in turn allows a more rational behavioral response that leads to intelligent, day to day decision-making and simultaneously, allows us to enjoy life to the full. By recognising the habitual patterns that give rise to negative emotions it is possible to tame the mind over a time, thereby changing our usual 'roller-coaster' emotional responses to stressful situations.

Scientific research has shown that a daily meditation practice can increase muscle relaxation and decrease the output of stress hormones and can also be used to reduce blood pressure and control pain. Meditation opposes the "fight-or-flight" mechanism that is directly related to stress. Recent studies have also shown that the brain can actually develop new neural pathways in people who practice meditation.

As previously mentioned, our response to external conditions such as; inter-personal conflict, high workload, disputes, financial concerns, etc. tends to result in mental and emotional distress. During this experience, we cannot make considered responses and invariably resort to our old habits. This is primarily because of the way we 'react' to such situations. In this context the term, 'reaction' is meant as an almost automatic response resulting in an emotional turmoil instead of a considered calm and thoughtful 'action.' Automatic responses derive from repetition and repetition leads to habituation. Therefore, stress is the habitual 'negative' response that becomes almost second nature.

So how can our habitual responses be changed?

We spend much of our waking moments contemplating and ruminating past events over which we have no control as these events have now passed. Yet, we go over and over situations thinking how we should have, could have, or might have responded. This in itself gives rise to tension and stress. We also spend an equal amount of time anticipating future events, and again as they have not as yet occurred we have little control of their outcome. With this perspective, we can see how such thought processes are unproductive and will result in mental disquiet.

Therefore, how much time do we actually give to the present moment? How often have you driven to work or taken a familiar route, only to be completely unaware of the journey itself. We rarely experience life as time passes us by, and we run mostly on autopilot. It is hardly surprising therefore that stress arises when we are unaware of the causes and conditions that precipitate it.

Implementing a daily meditation practice using simple techniques that can be used by anyone can help to develop mindfulness. Many think of meditation as a formal practice involving sitting in a lotus position, or removing oneself from society and living in a cave, but this is not the case. Meditation is simply being mindful in the present moment. The mind is always active and never switches off and even in sleep we dream. It is filled with millions of thoughts every day, most of which do not seem to be under our direct control and very often lead to actions that we regret.

For example, if when we awoke we were to say to the mind, *'today I shall be calm, collected and patient. I will not get angry or frustrated, and I will be in a positive state of mind.'* Usually within a very short period we encounter difficulties or conflict and this motivation disappears leaving us tense and frustrated. The mind does not bend easily to our will and like the body, requires exercise to become pliable.

We therefore need to develop positive responses instead of negative ones. Our senses provide an amazing amount of information to our conscious and subconscious mind, and we interpret this sensory input according to our own perspective and prejudice. Our view of the world is therefore, not always necessarily the way that it actually exists. What may be the cause of stress to one person may not be the cause for another. This aspect reinforces the argument that external factors are not the cause of stress, but it is our own response to circumstances and situations.

Meditation slows down the thought processes and allows spaces between the thoughts themselves; this in turn allows us to 'act' rather than 'react.' A calm and spacious mind can think beyond habituation and make considered responses to situations, this in turn reduces frustration and stress and allows for a more relaxed state of mind.

Meditation is not difficult to learn and can be practiced by anyone regardless of belief system. Simply sitting quietly and concentrating the mind on the breath for ten minutes morning and evening allows the mind to become less cluttered and more open. At first, this may be difficult as it is our habit to think, yet through bringing the mind back repeatedly to the breath rather than chasing thoughts and creating new fantasies instills a sense of calmness. This will then influence the thought patterns of the day and as stressful situations arise one can use this technique to control one's response away from the usual habituated behaviour. This reduces stress and over time brings a sense of calm and equanimity to your life.

The International Journal of Neuroscience stated that, *"Those practicing meditation for more than five years were physiologically 12 years younger than their chronological age, measured by reduction of blood pressure, better near-point vision, and auditory discrimination. Short-term meditators were physiologically five years younger than their chronological age."*

Introducing a daily meditation practice is very effective and can be taught to everyone regardless of any belief system or religion. It is simply smart thinking.