

Navigating Stress: A Holistic Approach

A Mindful Approach to Stress

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Stress is a normal occurrence of life. Healthy stress response motivates us to make changes to our lives or to ourselves that benefit our future experience. Unhealthy or “toxic stress” causes us to adopt behaviors and habits that adversely affect our well-being.⁽⁴⁾ An individual’s level of support, self-help skills, and his/her brain’s ability to process and respond to stressors indicate whether his/her stress will be toxic. The neural circuits in a healthy brain enable behavioral responses that are appropriate to what the individual is experiencing, e.g., being more vigilant in a potentially dangerous environment. Whereas, in an unhealthy brain, more experiences than necessary trigger the stress response and generate harmful physiological responses in the metabolic, cardiovascular and immune systems.⁽⁴⁾

Once a person is in a state of toxic stress they may begin to behave in ways that increase the harmful ramifications such as becoming anxious and or depressed, losing sleep at night, overeating comfort foods, or smoking or drinking alcohol excessively. Being “stressed out” may also cause us to neglect seeing friends, or to take time off from our work, or reduce our engagement in regular physical activity. Often, we are tempted to take medications—anxiolytics, sleep promoting agents—to help us cope, and, with time, our bodies may increase in weight and develop other symptoms of an unhealthy lifestyle. All of which increase our likelihood to experience even more stress in the future.⁽⁴⁾

Support for this toxic stress experience needs to address both the brain patterns that are over triggering our stress response as well as our negative behaviors resulting from stress. Mindfulness does both. It has been proven to increase mental resilience by developing space between our thoughts and reactions and giving us a choice on how to interpret our experience and respond to it. This decreases the occurrence of stress inducing thoughts and behaviors. Mindfulness also increases our self-awareness which helps us to recognize which of our behaviors and lifestyle choices are contributing to our stress. An increase in self-regulation helps us to modify these harmful habits and make choices that serve us better. Mindfulness also reduces the effects of negative emotions and increases emotional intelligence.^(3,5) It does this by teaching us how to observe our

emotions in order to understand their true nature, reducing our reactivity and developing healthier perspectives.⁽¹⁾ This then enhances emotional regulation and allows us to detach from negative thought patterns which decreases our stress and anxiety while offering us higher self-confidence and compassion.^(2,3) Mindfulness offers you the ability to understand the root cause of your stress and make the lifestyle changes necessary to ease it.

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Guided Imagery

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Stress is not merely a mental burden; it is a potent force that can manifest physically, creating a domino effect on the body's intricate systems. The cascade of stress hormones, such as cortisol and adrenaline, can disrupt the delicate balance within, leading to a host of physical ailments. Chronic stress has been linked to dozens of health issues including chronic illness and pain. In the realm of chronic illness, stress becomes a silent accomplice, exacerbating symptoms and slowing the healing process.

One of the key contributors to stress-related illnesses is the persistent activation of the sympathetic nervous system, commonly known as the "fight or flight" response. While this response is essential for survival in acute situations, chronic activation can lead to a state of hyperarousal that taxes the body's resources. As a result, individuals may find themselves trapped in a cycle of physical tension, inflammation, and compromised organ function.

In the world of grief and chronic illness, where my doula practice unfolds, the intertwining of stress and physical health is particularly poignant. Grieving individuals often experience heightened stress levels, as they grapple with the emotional toll of loss. This emotional stress can manifest in physical symptoms, from headaches to sleep disturbances, adding an additional layer to the already complex tapestry of grief.

Moreover, chronic illness itself becomes a source of perpetual stress. The uncertainty, pain, and adjustments required can create a constant undercurrent of tension that further challenges the body's resilience. As a doula, I guide individuals through this labyrinth, acknowledging the interconnectedness of their physical and emotional experiences.

Addressing stress in the context of chronic illness and grief goes beyond conventional medical interventions. It necessitates a holistic approach that embraces the spiritual dimension. Stress, when unattended, not only erodes physical health but also casts shadows on the soul. Spiritual well-being becomes a vital anchor in navigating these turbulent waters, providing solace, meaning, and a sense of connection.

In my doula practice, I weave the understanding of stress as a spiritual challenge into the support I offer. Through meditation practices, gentle encouragement, and compassionate companionship, I empower individuals to confront their stressors with resilience and grace. By fostering a connection between the physical and spiritual aspects of their being, I aim to guide them towards a more harmonious and integrated existence.

In conclusion, the effects of stress are profound and far-reaching, permeating both the physical and spiritual dimensions of our lives. As a Death and Spiritual doula, I bear

witness to the transformative power of acknowledging and addressing stress in its entirety. By embracing a holistic approach that nurtures the body and soul, we can pave the way for healing and find a deeper sense of peace amidst life's challenges.

Transpersonal Coaching and Hypnotherapy

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Stress is a natural feature of living on planet Earth. Consider the vagaries of the natural world: wind, drought, flood, cold and so on. Our human stresses are different of course, but the same principles apply. The crying baby, the empty check book, the lump under the arm, are all things to worry about. Yet there are ways to understand and work with stress. Intentional breathing, hypnotherapy, and re-training the mind to deal with stress through Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) are simple techniques with powerful and remarkable consequences. Our bodies can relax. Relaxation is the antidote to stress. However, if you've experienced great stresses (traumas), then your path will be deeper. These are also known as "life quakes." Big events that shake your life up so it's not ever the same.

Peter Levine's work on trauma shows how we hold stress in the body. Our bodies are our field of experience – everything that happens to us, or that we create, happens in the body. Our language is full of it, "my guts are twisted in a knot", "I'm heartbroken."

The English pediatrician D.W. Winnicott described it this way: "biological basis for excitements that show the sequence; preparation with increasing tension, climax, and then a measure of relaxation following some form of gratification." This is the three-fold process every being experiences: tension, release, relaxation. The part of the cycle that includes stress is obviously tension.

For highly stressed or traumatized individuals, it's difficult to be in the body, or even feel it, which is why therapy that has specific body-based practices is effective. This is not so for traditional therapy, in which a highly-stressed (traumatized) individual is not reached by the therapist despite both their best efforts. Peter Levine discusses this in "In an Unspoken Voice: How the Body Releases Trauma and Restores Goodness." Therapy must involve the body. There has to be a connection, especially if the client experiences disassociation related to trauma. Aside from somatic sensing (listening to the body), connection can be made via hypnosis which bypasses the defenses to release held stress.

The degree of presence in the body is determined by the therapist within the first few sessions. Deep breathing into different parts of the body both awakens and informs the person as to where trauma may be held and where stress from everyday life settles. Noticing the body from the inside out is a valuable tool. For example, flaccid muscles reflect the sense of immobilization – freezing in place from fear. While tight contracted muscles speak to hyper-vigilance, the urge to flee.

Where-ever stress lands for you, there's comfort in knowing that your body's wise voice will gently guide you home. It just needs to be heard.

Naturopathic Medicine

By: SHAYNA KELLER, NATUROPATHIC DOCTOR AT WEST ELKS WELLNESS
Physiological Stress

A diagnosis can be a symptom. Even diagnoses like bipolar disorder or hypothyroid can be symptoms of an underlying issue. As a naturopathic doctor it is my duty to unpack these 'diagnoses' and search for the root cause of the issue because each one of us is biochemically unique. There are three things I like to screen for in my new patients presenting with vague symptoms such as psychiatric issues, fatigue, hair loss and sleep issues – blood sugar stability, thyroid function and mineral levels.

Blood Sugar

I had a patient in her 30s that came to see me – she had hair loss, a new diagnosis of bipolar 1 and significant fatigue from the medications to stabilize her mood. We ran fasting labs related to blood sugar including insulin, hemoglobin a1c and glucose levels. Her blood work with HOMA-IR suggested insulin resistance². After reviewing her diet, we found she was eating very little protein and a lot of carbohydrates. Focusing on getting adequate macronutrients¹ throughout the day stabilized her mood significantly enough that she was able to come off her medications as she was now overmedicated and misdiagnosed.

Thyroid and Minerals³

The thyroid gland sits at the base of our neck and is the master metabolic organ. Clinically patients presenting with hair loss, fatigue, weight gain/loss, sleep issues, nighttime sweating and anxiety/depression. These folks have poor digestion and thus inadequate minerals such as iron, zinc, magnesium, selenium, iodine, copper, manganese – all of which require proper stomach acid production to be absorbed. To add to the digestion aspect of thyroid function, T4 is the inactive thyroid hormone that is

converted into T3 primarily in the liver⁴ and then recirculated back to the thyroid. If we do not have a well-functioning liver, which also has significant uses for minerals and vitamins, especially B vitamins, our body will have a difficult time converting T4 into T3 and increase our chances of being diagnosed with low thyroid and put on levothyroxine medication.

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Psychiatric Mental Health Nurse Practitioner

By: Lisa Boffa. psychiatric mental health nurse practitioner.

Navigating stress can be a complicated and multi-faceted issue. It requires an approach that is individualized, and often layered to address the many areas stress comes from. As a psychiatric nurse practitioner addressing stress, I would start by uncovering the main stress triggers in my client's life. These would include areas of lifestyle, trauma history, and untreated or unresolved mental health issues. Once I am familiar with the individual picture of my client's stress landscape, I would collaborate with them to create a treatment plan.

Therapy is integral to learning coping mechanisms that can help alleviate stress. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a great approach to stress management. I frequently recommend CBT before trying medication to treat stress and the depression and anxiety that frequently accompany chronic stress. CBT challenges unhelpful behavior and unhelpful ways of thinking. Through mindful engagement people learn to identify the source of stress, learn better ways of coping, and improve their quality of life (APA, 2017).

Lifestyle changes are often needed to address stress. Frequently the source of stress can be identified as a feeling of being out of control or feeling overwhelmed. Although we may not be able to change the source of stress, we may be able to change how we deal with it, and how we treat ourselves as we move through situations. Self-care, staying active and engaged, and treating our bodies right can go a long way towards re-establishing feelings of balance and control in our lives (Slurink et al., 2022).

My specialty is the evaluation of mental health issues. Chronic stress causes persistent stimulation of stress hormones, decreased production of protective neurotransmitters such as Serotonin and the overstimulation of stress areas in the brain. There is a direct link between stressful life events and the development of depression and anxiety (Taft & Nemerof, 2015). Although lifestyle changes and therapy are highly effective, there are times when they are not enough. In this case, medication may be indicated for treatment. Using evidence-based algorithms and well-known and studied medications, I would suggest anti-depressant and/or anti-anxiety medications if needed. I frequently treat insomnia, a byproduct of stress, with sleep hygiene techniques and/or medication as well (Alanazi, Albuhairy et. al., 2023).

Ongoing treatment, collaboration and follow-up is very important to effective resolution of symptoms. I let my patients drive their care, as they are their own best advocates, and know their bodies and minds best. Frequent check-ins help with accountability, support and staying on track. Sometimes creating change takes time, dedication, and persistence. When medication treatment for depression and anxiety is initiated, I recommend using it for a year before consideration of titrating down or off them (Zweibel & Viguera, 2023). With careful consideration of the situation and better coping mechanisms in place, many patients can then move forward and learn to cope better with stress.

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Health, Life, & Spiritual Emergence Coach

By: Elisabeth “Lava” Lawaczek, Certified Health, Life & Spiritual Emergence® Coach

How many of you would like to live a simpler life? Our modern society has encouraged us to have a complicated life, which bombards our nervous system, stimulating the sympathetic nervous system (fight or flight). Other than the location, body, and family that you were born into . . . you are the architect of your life.

How many of you would like to have a fuller life? When one has a very spacious chapter of life, it's a wonderful opportunity to pause and design your life to be simple and yet fulfilling.

For clients who express that they are stressed out, I take them through an introspection exercise to reflect on their daily life in body, mind, and spirit. The main question is, do you feel balanced in body, mind and spirit in your work and your personal life?

What if you looked at your life through the lens of “How much time do I spend to allow myself and others in my life to both grow and rest, in BODY, MIND, and SPIRIT?”

Let's try some introspection now.

Tell me what a life in the day of YOU is like. Grab a pen and paper.

Write out hour by hour, what your day usually looks like.

Here are some prompts to support you.

1. What time do you usually wake up in the morning?
2. What are your first thoughts?

3. What do you do during the first hour of your day?
4. How many hours do you work?
5. How much time do you spend with family/friends?
6. How many hours do you spend for your self-care?
 - a. How much of that time is for your body?
 - b. For your mind?
 - c. For your spiritual side?
7. What do you do in the last hour of your day before bedtime?
8. What time do you go to bed?

After reviewing your typical day, what do you want to shift to feel less stressed and more balanced?

What's the one step you can take in the next week to manage your time and shift your daily schedule to take better care of yourself and still be there for the other responsibilities in your life?

It's a much more meaningful experience to have a holistic coach ask you open-ended questions specific to what you share about your life and have that coach help you reflect on what you share. For a complimentary discovery session with Elisabeth, sign up at her table to connect.

Visit Beetrueyou.com or text Elisabeth at 805-669-6128

Transpersonal Psychotherapist & Coach

By: Sara Schifino, MA, Transpersonal Psychotherapist & Coach, Certified NLP Practitioner, Meditation & Mindfulness Mentor, Shamanic Journeywork Practitioner

There are many reasons we can feel stress in our lives and many approaches for navigating through it. We may experience stress related to work, relationships, illness, loss, life transitions, inner conflict, isolation, and the list goes on. A certain level of stress is healthy, beneficial even. A healthy level of stress can stimulate action, creative

thinking, and growth. However, too much stress can induce brain fog, difficulty making decisions and overwhelm. It can lead to anxiety and depression and can perpetuate the problems that caused the stress to begin with.

Stress is often a product of the mind, which directly impacts both our emotional and physical well-being. When thoughts carry us to the past, we can experience nostalgia and joyful memories - thus feeling calm and content. Conversely, we might experience regret and painful memories - leading to feelings of guilt or shame. When the mind takes us to the future, we can feel hope and excitement, but we can also experience dread or anxiety around the unknown and unwanted events we fear may happen. This can, in turn, lead to tension and even illness in the body.

By employing mindfulness practices, we train the mind to be in the present moment. We bring awareness to the immediacy of our body by tuning into our sensory experience. We notice our surroundings. We connect with our breath. Not only is the breath an anchor to the present moment, there are also breathwork practices that stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system, which can have a powerful effect on reducing stress levels. Through mindfulness, we get to experience our own ok-ness in the here and now.

Once in a calmer state, we can see the source(s) of our stress more clearly and identify which aspects of our situation we have agency around. Next, we can employ an NLP technique called “chunking,” which posits that we can complete most tasks when we break them down into smaller bits. We can then look at these “chunks” and decide where to begin, what comes next, and what we can put on the bottom of the pile for now.

To better understand our stress, it's also beneficial to explore the answers to the following questions:

What are my needs and are they being met?

What are my internal and external resources? Am I utilizing them to the best of my ability?

Am I eating well, getting quality sleep, exercising, connecting with community?

How am I perpetuating my own stress and what am I honestly willing to do differently?

Do I need help?

If the answer to the last question is “yes,” there are many local wellness practitioners who can support you. If you'd like to connect with me for a free consultation, you can reach me at sara@kalacoaching.com.