

Mental Wellness Task Force Lunch and Learn Series

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Bruce S Rabin, MD, PhD

rabinbs@upmc.edu

COPING WITH CHRONIC STRESS: EXPRESSIVE WRITING, GUIDED IMAGERY, MEDITATION

We will now direct our attention to chronic stress. Chronic stress consists of all aspects of your life that activate the stress reactive areas of the brain. We will help you to find ways that can decrease the activity of the stress responsive brain areas and keep the concentration of stress hormones low to improve the quality of your mental and physical health.

Interestingly, writing can contribute to the prevention of illness and help you move ahead by reducing the anxiety associated with things that are of concern to you. The technique that we are going to ask you to use is different than keeping a daily diary, often called "Journaling". If you would like to keep a daily Journal, please do so. However, in addition, please consider doing the following writing technique that we call, 'Expressive Writing'.

You can use Expressive Writing to write about things that have bothered you for years or something that occurred yesterday and is bothering you. It looks simple to do, and it is. However, the effects are often dramatic.

The difference between Expressive Writing and Journaling is that no one will ever see what you write about with Expressive Writing. You keep what you write when Journaling. Therefore, someone may find what you have written. After you finish doing Expressive Writing you will tear the paper into small pieces and flush it away. While doing expressive writing you may cry. It is normal, don't worry about it.

- This allows you to write about your most private, personal, and intimate issues.
- The things you cannot discuss with anyone.
- The things you do not want anyone to judge you about.

EXPRESSIVE WRITING DIRECTIONS:

Take a sheet of paper and something to write with. You cannot use a keyboard, you must write. Find a quiet place where you will not be disturbed for 15 minutes.

- Pick any issue of concern to you to write about
- The only rule is that you write continuously for 15 minutes. If you run out of things to say, just repeat what you have already written. Don't worry about grammar, spelling, or sentence structure.
- While writing DO NOT READ what you have already written
- Your writing is completely confidential. **When you finish writing, tear up what you have written and toss it out so that no one will ever see what you wrote.**
- If you find it helpful you can write 3-4 times a week.

Why does this work?

The answer is that we don't know. It doesn't matter that we don't know, it works.

You will notice that the things you write about do not go away. They do seem to float to the back of your head. They will become less recurrent, less troubling. You will be calmer. You may notice that you are sleeping better and having the 'blues' less often.

ADDITIONAL WRITING EXERCISES YOU MAY WANT TO TRY:

Each day, or whenever you wish, write about something you are grateful for. It may be as few or many words as you want. Then whenever you are feeling "blue", think about some of the things that you are grateful for.

Each day, or whenever you wish, write about a positive life experience.

Each day, or whenever you wish, write about a traumatic life experience.

Prescription:

Each day of this week take 3-5 deep breaths to help this technique become a routine part of your life

Each day of this week go to the place in your brain where you are keeping the funny things, and think about one of them.

Each day of this week when you are happy, say your chant to yourself several times. This will help your brain become conditioned to the chant so that when you are upset and under stress, all you will have to do is think your chant, to calm yourself.

2-3 times this week do Expressive writing

COPING WITH CHRONIC STRESS: GUIDED IMAGERY

Q: What is guided imagery?

Guided imagery is a script that someone reads and you listen to that directs you to create beautiful and comfortable thoughts and pictures in your mind where temperature, smell, sounds, beauty, people, sights, are relaxing. Somewhat similar to a wonderful vacation taken without going anywhere, and achieving some of the same relaxing benefits without having to return home and wait for a long time for your luggage at the airport baggage claim). Guided imagery is used for relaxation and healing.

Q: How does guided imagery help calm the mind?

The thoughts that are disturbing to you are set aside and your brain can calm itself. By focusing your attention on the words of the guided imagery and letting it take you to a wonderful and ideal imaginary place for you to relax, the stress responsive areas of the brain calm down. Guided imagery helps to create a sense of peace and tranquility.

Q: Are there other advantages to guided imagery?

Guided imagery has also proved effective in patients as an aid to healing. Studies have indicated that encouraging patients to listen to imagery during anesthesia induction and medical or surgical procedures has decreased anxiety and stress levels significantly. It has been demonstrated to reduce the need for analgesic medication of hospitalized patients, thus reducing side effects and decreasing the recovery time frame.

Q: How can I do guided imagery?

You will be provided with a CD to listen to guided imagery.

The more you listen to Guided Imagery, the more effective it becomes. If you listen to it often, when you are calm and happy, and then think about it when you are upset, your brain will quickly take you back to a state of calmness.

COPING WITH CHRONIC STRESS: MEDITATION

We now want to add another technique to your repertoire of what you can do to increase your ability of coping with stress. Be aware that the material that we are providing to you may not work for you. Everyone is different. Not everyone likes modern art, or a New York strip steak, or Sushi, or starch in their shirts, or tan khaki pants. All we can do is hope you find the information that we are providing life changing so that as a result you will not only achieve a better quality of mental and physical health but you will also help others to achieve the same.

Before teaching you how to meditate we need to clarify some things. There are books and courses taught by experts who study meditation and how to teach the technique to others. Multiple sessions of training have the advantage of giving you practice and providing you with different approaches to meditation with the expectation that you will find one that works for you.

We are going to give you an adequate amount of information and technique so that you can meditate. It may be all that you need now that you have apparently made a commitment to work to achieve a better quality of mental and physical health

Q: What is meditation?

Meditation is a technique to take your attention and focus it on something that has no emotional value to you. This will contribute to lowering the concentration of the stress hormones in your blood. Meditation will train your mind to become less responsive to stress and will result in physiologic changes that counteract the harmful effects of stress throughout the day.

Meditation is similar to Guided Imagery but in Guided Imagery you have something to listen to. In meditation you use your mind to produce calmness and relaxation.

Q: What is the goal of the meditation?

It is to find a way for you to **NOT** pay attention to thoughts that you find disturbing (such thoughts will activate the stress pathways in your brain). Therefore, you will want to train your mind to briefly clear disturbing thoughts from your mind.

Q: Is there a trick to get me to stop thinking about things that disturb me?

When you are trying to relax your mind and an intrusive thought enters, focusing your attention on a word, phrase, sound, or repetitive movement (such as achieved with Tai chi) helps you to temporarily let go of the invading thought. It is important that for a few minutes you focus on the neutral event rather than the thoughts that are bothersome to you. Knowing that there is nothing that you are going to do about a thought that is disturbing you will help in letting the thought go.

Q: Will I learn to do this quickly?

Probably not. You must practice and repeat the techniques being taught to you. If you have taken piano lessons, you know that without practice your mind could not get your fingers to where you wanted them to be. Your mind gets better with practice. The more you practice relaxing your mind, the easier and more effective it will become.

Q: Is there a reason that I should be concerned about doing this?

Learning to relax will not make you a less effective person or negatively affect your work performance. In fact, learning to relax will make you more efficient in your everyday life, increase your feeling of being calm, and will enable you to interact with others better.

Q: Can learning how to meditate help me in my everyday life?

Yes, you will notice that you are comfortable when you are aware of the following whereas you may not have been comfortable before practicing meditation:

- Slowing down, not trying to do multiple things at once
- Bringing your full awareness to what you are doing at any given time. Your mind will wander less.

Q: It sounds to me as if praying can be considered a form of meditation?

It can and is.

Meditation technique: Below is a meditation technique for you to read and practice. You can also find meditation instructions on the CD.

- Find a quiet place where you can sit and be comfortable (it is important that you are comfortable so that you are not disturbed by thoughts of being uncomfortable)
- Make sure your clothes are comfortable and that your belt or shoes or underwear are not uncomfortable
- Find a place that is quiet and private so that you are not disturbed by noise or trying to listen to something that you may suddenly find interesting
- Select a word that you will use as a focus of your attention. The word should not have any meaning to you. Some examples are CALM, PEACE, QUIET, RELAX, SMOOTH, REST
- Focus your attention on your breath as you inhale and exhale
- Remember, that meditation is a trick that for a few minutes helps you focus on a neutral event rather than thoughts that are bothersome to you. Knowing that there is nothing that you are going to do about the thought that is disturbing you for the brief time that you are trying to relax, will help in letting the thought go.
- The importance of the word and paying attention to your breathing is to get your attention away from the thoughts that are disturbing to you
- Allowing your brain to relax for a few minutes will help you achieve more calmness and lower levels of stress hormones with health benefits
- Sit, be comfortable, you can close your eyes or leave them open, whatever you prefer
- Meditating for approximately 15 minutes is good. However, only do so as long as you are comfortable doing it.

Q: Can I get a book or take a class on meditation?

Of course, if what you have just done is helpful and you would like to explore whether meditation can be made more comfortable for you to do, please, buy a book, video, or attend a class.

Remember: The more you practice relaxing your mind, the easier and more effective it will become. It may take as long as 8 weeks before you begin to feel comfortable with meditation and realize that the technique is helping you to feel calm. Don't give up by being disappointed if you do not feel that the technique is working for you.

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You are welcome to use the following space, or your journal, to reflect on how you feel after doing Expressive Writing, Guided Imagery, or Meditation.

Q. I often have many things on my mind, even when I am doing one task. How can I learn to focus on one thing without distractions?

There are many ways to become more mindful, or to maintain full awareness from moment to moment. One of the simplest and most effective ways is to PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR BREATHING.

Another way to become more mindful is to train the mind and body to focus at the beginning of each new activity. This could be before traveling to work in the morning or before eating a meal.

Make an effort to focus on one priority at a time in your everyday life.

Remember: Some people like to play the piano and others the violin. Some like to play football and others squash. People differ in the behaviors that are comfortable and enjoyable for them. You will find that we offer a variety of behaviors for you to use to help you cope with stress. This provides you with the opportunity to pick those that are comfortable and enjoyable for you. You do not need to use them all; rather you need to find what works for you so that it is something that you will use.

SUMMARY AND CLOSING THOUGHTS

Stress can increase the risk of becoming ill. Increasing our ability to cope with stress by using behaviors and techniques that minimize the reactivity of the brain to stress can have a positive effect on the susceptibility to disease and on the course of disease.

By being better able to cope with stress you will have LESS of an elevation of stress hormones when your brain perceives something as stress.

Coping with stress reduces the response of your brain to stress!!!!

We ask you to make you life more meaningful by:

- Using what you learned in the program all the time so that it becomes part of your life.
- Sharing this information with those who are important to you.
- Telling them how the quality of your life is better.
- Having them share with others.
- Changing the culture to one where healthy lifestyle behavior is used on a routine basis to enhance the quality of mental and physical health.
- Being patient
- Believing that you will succeed

Be a MEANINGFUL ROLE MODEL for those you love and those who love you