

Dealing with Secondhand Stress

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If you have been following this series, you now have a toolkit of techniques and strategies to manage stress quickly and effectively.

The next question you may ask is: How do I deal with stress at the source?

Stress contributors come largely from the environment around you. You know – the guy fidgeting around your workspace every now and then, waiting for the changes to his system...

Wouldn't it be nice if you could just make that guy go away? Well, I can't do much to help you get rid of him... but I can give you some skills that will help you put him out of your mind.

Answer:

There is a Buddhist proverb that says: The best way to manage the mind is to let thoughts flow through you like water. This is easier said than done, particularly after experiencing abrasive dialogue.

In this respect, the same element that makes us so successful as a species works against us. We remember things. For most of us, thoughts do not rush away with the passing moment. We can, however, develop tools to send away those thoughts and feelings that may not be too useful to us.

"But I already tried putting it out of my mind," you say. "It just keeps coming back."

Yes, it is not easy to will away stress. No matter how many times you listen to that DVD and repeat the affirmations of being calm, it does not seem to stick. The other voice in your head keeps on saying, "That is just a DVD – the cause of my worry is real."

The solution:

Use the abilities of your mind, in the correct way. Cognitive thinking is very effective, but it is pretty far removed from the lower levels of thinking that influence our physiology. The stress response is largely governed by lower levels of thinking. For many of us, these lower level modes of thought are autonomous and intangible.

There are, however, many ways of influencing and controlling these lower level modes of thought. The exciting thing is, you don't have to be a Mind Master or Guru to do it.

In our first article, we taught you a breathing skill that will quickly change your mental state to one of calm. Breathing is a very powerful skill for letting go of thought patterns that are not helpful. With continued practice, this skill becomes so effective that it will quickly dispel even the most tenacious worry.

So how will this help me to deal with the guy fidgeting around my workspace, or the woman with the incessant mildly cynical comments? You may not be able to get rid of the people... but you most certainly can let go of what they have just dumped on you.

The next time someone unloads on you, or the accumulated tension of the situation wears you down, try combining the breathing skill with a new technique:

Technique:

As soon as the exchange is over (or you can't seem to let go of an issue), go to the restroom. This technique will be most effective if it is done immediately after the exchange, because the influences will have less time to sink into you.

- Run some water in the sink and wash your hands.
- As you wash your hands, do the “Selfmastery™ Centered Breathing Skill.” (See our previous article)
- As you wash your hands, visualize the stressful exchange being washed away with the water, like dirt.
- Pay particular attention to the emotion and tension the exchange has brought up; let go of these feelings as the water runs.
- Wash your face as well, if you like.

Turn off the water. As you dry your hands, visualize being filled with calm feelings.

Science:

Are you just psyching yourself up?

Perhaps... Controlling your emotional states is, to a large degree, reinforcing the correct thoughts. In the end, the technique will work if you take it seriously and apply yourself to the process.

I recommend that you spend some time later in the day, assessing the stressful exchange. Evaluate whether you should confront the person about their delivery at some later point in time. If something bothers you enough to cause stress, it is usually worth putting some finality to the incident.

Stress is caused by influences of the environment. However, stress persists and is reinforced by the actions of the mind and body. Most of the mental processes that allow stress to linger and be reinforced are the lower level physiological processes, such as the rhythm of your breathing.

What is the best remedy towards reducing stressful thoughts? Taking quick and direct action to counteract them... Continued practice in doing this not only alleviates the stress, but develops your ability to gain control over future incidents. The more you apply mental control, the more mental control is enhanced.