

A Reliable, Accessible Ally for Coping with Stress, Pain and Illness

by Janet Curry, M.A.

(As printed in The Durango Herald on Monday, August 12, 2007)

Stress: it's the modern "catch-all" term for whatever causes us unhappiness, dissatisfaction, or suffering. It's that relentless and nagging pull of wanting things to be different from how they are right now. We feel it in our bodies, our mental/emotional lives, and in our relationships. And let's face it, with multiple studies estimating that 75-90% of doctor's visits are due to stress-related ailments and complaints, stress in America is chronic, it's pervasive, and it's wearing us down.

But that's not the entire story. A growing body of research is demonstrating that we can significantly improve how we cope with our stress by cultivating and refining how we pay attention—to sensations in our bodies, to our thoughts, emotions, and patterns of behavior. This research shows that, fundamentally, it is our resistance to experiencing what we don't want (stress) and our attempts to deny, distract, or numb ourselves to these unwanted aspects of our lives that leads to the destructive wear and tear on the body, mind, and heart. The more we can attend to what is happening in any moment, whether we like it or not, with a sense of curiosity and acceptance, the more we can find new and spacious options for learning, growing, and healing.

How to begin? The following three steps are a simple yet powerful way of cultivating our inherent ability to pay attention to our experience from moment to moment, kindly and without judgment. Adapted from a clinically proven health care intervention called Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, this "3-Minute Breathing Space" can be used at any time, and particularly in moments when you are feeling stress or difficulty.

In fact, it might be useful to pause as you are reading this, and intentionally bring to mind any stressful circumstance, event, or condition that you may be experiencing currently—something in particular that is weighing on you. Perhaps you are experiencing pain, relationship struggles, difficulty at work, illness, loss of a loved one, financial concerns, anxiety, or depression.

As you call this stressful situation into the present moment, the first step is seeing if you can turn toward and open to your experience with a sense of interest, perhaps asking yourself, "What is my experience right now?" Noticing what thoughts are going through your mind, and without getting caught up in them, just watching them come and go, like clouds moving through a blue sky. Noticing, too, what feelings you are experiencing, and allowing them to be here, even if they are unpleasant or painful. And becoming aware of what body sensations

are present, perhaps even taking a quick scan through the body to make note of any tightness or bracing.

Step 2 involves gently redirecting your attention to focus on the physical sensations of your breathing, feeling the breath as it moves into the belly, the sense of the belly expanding on the inbreath, and falling back on the outbreath, anchoring your awareness in the present moment.

As a third step, expanding your attention to include a sense of the body as a whole, an awareness of your posture, your facial expression, and any areas of tension, resistance, or discomfort. Then, see if you can breathe into these areas of unpleasantness on the inbreath, and on the outbreath releasing, softening, and opening.

These simple steps, taking only three minutes to practice, provide a powerful means of attending to your own experience, even—and especially—in moments of stress, pain, or illness. And since a stress-free life is neither possible nor, in all honesty, desirable, there's no time like the present for coming to terms with our lives just as they are, resting moment by moment in our own innate wisdom, health, and wholeness.

Janet Curry, M.A., is a Mental Health Counselor in private practice and teaches Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction classes in Durango. She can be reached at: Stillpoint Counseling and Mindfulness Training, LLC: # 970-779-0611, or janet@stillpointmindfulnesstraining.com .