

Talking about Stress

Be patient to all that is unsolved in your heart,
And try to love the questions themselves.
Do not seek the answers that cannot be given you,
Because the point is to live everything,
Live the questions now.
Perhaps you will gradually without noticing it,
Live along some distant day into the answers.
Rainer Maria Rilke

Saturday morning. *After finishing a short meditation, the people in the healing circle appear relaxed as they leave the large group and gather into small groups of six or seven for discussion. Their faces are calm and their shoulders appear to have softened.*

Drawing on his knowledge of the physiology of stress, Rob begins by asking his small group to identify their stressors, and their unique stress reaction.

When was the last time you felt suddenly stressed, scared, angry or upset? Think about situations in which you were super stressed. They could be related to the cancer diagnosis, like going in for a medical appointment, or anything else in your life, like work or with your family.

As you recall your stress reaction, imagine a computer could measure every sensation in your body you were experiencing, every emotion you felt and every thought going through your mind. What the computer would sense is your unique physical and emotional reaction to stress. Or another way to ask it is ‘How do your body and emotions let you know when you are stressed?’

Nancy is the first to speak. She’s a 50-year-old woman who lost her job as a manager in a massive restructuring just before her diagnosis of fallopian tube cancer. Recovering from a major operation and six months of chemotherapy, and living alone, she’s in the midst of trying to rebuild

her life. Her voice becomes thin as she recounts her experience of going into an operating room for the first time in her life. Just before the operation, her physician told her that he couldn't see enough from the CAT scan to know what he would find when he 'opened her up.' "The nurses were tying my arms down to the operating table while they were getting me to sign the consent form. I felt so out of control. It was all so stressful."

After a lifetime of working hard, planning her life step by step, the loss of control is very hard on Nancy. "Will the cancer recur? Will I get through the operation? Will I need chemotherapy? What are the side effects? How can I afford being off work? What am I going to do!!!!?"

Nancy pauses, and then reflects on the question about her physical symptoms of stress. "When I feel this stressed, my body goes into high speed tension. I'm shaking inside. I start pacing."

Stress experts Lazarus and Folman defined the stress reaction as a condition in which an individual perceives the demands of the situation as exceeding their resources. When Nancy perceives that she is not in total control of her life (and believes she should be), this initiates a chemical reaction in the primitive part of her brain that releases adrenaline, the 'fight or flight' hormone, into her blood stream.

Adrenaline gives her body a sudden burst of energy. It causes Nancy's heart to pump hard and fast. Her blood pressure goes up. She takes quick shallow breaths high in her chest. Her digestive tract shuts down, causing symptoms of an acidic stomach, complete with cramps or "butterflies", and her blood is sent to increasingly tense muscles, causing pain or jitters. Adrenaline causes a sense of panic, headache, sweaty palms, and other disturbing symptoms.

The second major hormone released during the stress reaction is cortisol, which increases the sugars and fats in the blood. Every time Nancy feels overwhelmed, adrenaline and cortisol bathe every cell in her body.

Unfortunately, frequent stress reactions suppress Nancy's body's natural ability to heal. Stress hormones break down body tissue, including the very DNA that instructs every cell how to do its work. The stress reaction suppresses the immune system, which, in a more relaxed state, can help fight off cancer cells and infections. If Nancy continues to live in a high-strung state, she'll be susceptible to heart attacks, diabetes, inflammation like arthritis, ulcers, chronic pain, and dementia... just to list a few.

Kathy, an executive recovering from Hodgkin's Lymphoma and autoimmune liver disease, identifies anger as her response to stressful situations. "If someone treats me with disrespect, like some woman tries to butt in

front of me in line, I just go crazy. I get really angry. I feel like I have to defend myself.” She notices the stress reaction in her body as a constriction in her throat, so much so that sometimes she feels like she can’t speak.

Kathy is mindful of her body’s reaction to feeling stressed and can begin ‘de-stressing’ before she gets too worked up. Her flash of anger illustrates that the stress reaction includes an emotional reaction that even changes how she thinks. She becomes irritated, emotional, angry and ready to act. She is primed to fight or flee, often without being able to think through the problem.

Bonnie, a breast cancer survivor, now in her seventies, pipes up. She has had a lifetime full of looking after others. She sacrificed her own needs when her husband went back to school to get a Ph.D. She cared for their children almost single-handedly and really ran all aspects of the household, including the finances. The pattern continued as her husband invested more of his time in his work. Sadly, upon retirement, he was diagnosed with multiple myeloma, and Bonnie was his primary caregiver through the last seven years of his life.

Now that he’s gone, his absence contributes to her feeling of emptiness which also causes stress. “When you’re in a loving relationship for a long time and accustomed to doing everything together, it’s stressful to do things on your own. Now I have to go to tests and cancer doctors by myself and nobody is there to go back home to.”

When asked to identify a stressful situation, Bonnie talks about all the responsibilities of homeownership, including suddenly dealing with an “exploding” toilet. Having to get the maintenance man in, and dealing with several problems all at the same time, was very stressful. When she’s stressed Bonnie feels tension in her back, and her gut goes into knots.

But like many people, Bonnie has a hard time recognizing her own stress reaction because she has always focused outwardly, always has been the one to wrap the blanket of care around others. So, in a demanding situation, she tends to disconnect from her body and its needs. She doesn’t connect the back tension with her stress. Instead she focuses on taking care of problems—mostly everyone else’s. She ends up not paying attention to her body’s messages and pushes herself beyond her limits.

The aching gut and the tension in her back may be the only signals telling Bonnie ‘This is too much. I need your attention.’ If Bonnie listens mindfully to her internal signs of stress, she can then take better care of herself and be more effective in the outer world.

Dawn, a lady in her mid fifties tells the group “I feel a lot of stress from being disrespected, having people try to mould me the way they prefer. I don’t like the pressure of other people’s expectations.”

Dawn worked as a teacher, often choosing to work in inner city schools where many of the children needed her loving attention. She was first diagnosed with a rare carcinoid tumor of the lung ten years ago which was treated easily with an operation. Then, a year ago, she began to notice a pain in her hip which happened just at the same time her personal physician moved away. She went to her husband’s doctor but says “I don’t feel comfortable with him. He shuts me down. He doesn’t take me seriously. I spent a year trying to talk to him but I was always cut off and told ‘It’s just arthritis’.

“I never show my frustration when I’m in that kind of situation. I hide my stress. I’ve always done that. It’s just like when I was a teen at the dinner table. I was saying to my Dad ‘I’m going to university.’ He said, ‘Huh, I’ll believe that when I see it.’ I just got quiet and didn’t say anything. It’s one thing to deal with the cancer coming back in my hip but worse when I can see that I fall back into being how I was in my family, when I was young.”

Dawn was very angry with the delay in the diagnosis because the doctor hadn’t listened to her and she spent several days crying, blaming others, and thinking how stupid the doctor was. “Gradually I settled down and got myself back into nightly meditation and my usual healing yoga routine. And things started to calm down.”

Dawn returns to the question of where in her body she experiences stress. “When I’m upset I feel a constriction in my third eye,” she points to her forehead between her eyes. “I feel this swelling, sometimes to the point of bursting. In every picture from my childhood, I’m frowning there.”

Not only were the sensations on Dawn’s forehead raising a red flag of stress – they were also providing a gateway to unresolved issues she had long kept inside. It was only by paying attention to the physical clues that she was able to make these deeper associations. She realized that not all of her anger was coming from thinking about the delays caused by her physician. Old emotions from not being taken seriously long ago were coming to the surface. Through awareness she began to heal these psychological issues.

Jan speaks next. In her early fifties, she continues to struggle with the long-term effects of her rectal cancer which occurred seven years earlier. Her gut is unreliable, forcing her to run off to the bathroom at a mo-

ment's notice. Feeling stressed makes this worse. Her job is stressful and she feels her workplace is broken. She wonders whether to quit now or try to make it to retirement.

But mostly Jan worries about her family and the myriad of other people in her life. A few years ago, her adult daughter survived a terrible accident. Starting in the months that followed the accident, albeit less so recently, Jan sometimes feels an "instant jolt of anxiety", like a huge wave starting in her stomach and rolling up her chest, sometimes sticking in her throat.

This anxiety can hit her just from seeing her daughter's name come up on the call screener. When she's too upset she simply does not answer the phone. Later, when she notices that her body has settled, she plays the answering machine message and calls her daughter back from a position of peace and true love. Jan wisely knows her own limits and how she can best use her precious energy.

Jan listens to the wisdom of her body to guide her towards healing and contentment. Instead of focusing solely on the 'negative' messages from her body, she also notices when she feels good. "When I'm on the right track, making the decisions that are right for me, I get this feeling in my body of being grounded. I feel my energy even in my legs. I've got bounce. And my chest feels light and starts to hum." She feels a deep calm in her gut and her mind remains open and clear. By working through her emotional blocks and following the positive sensations from her body, Jan is moving forward on her journey towards wholeness.

Antidotes to Stress

The last few minutes of the small group discussion focus on what people do to help themselves when they recognize their own stress reaction.

Kathy says she pauses and takes a few slow breaths deep into my belly. She also adds a variation to this classic relaxation technique: "When I breathe, I smile. It makes me feel like laughing."

Working the smiling muscles actually energizes the very part of Kathy's brain responsible for laughing. She can catch a quick updraft of emotion simply by smiling, lifting up her cheeks, squinting her eyes, and chuckling at herself. Like the relaxation breath, smiling actually changes the chemicals in her brain and body.

Kathy describes how she deals with situations such as someone cutting in front of her in line. "Now I use compassion in the situation. When my

ego is feeling thwarted, I look for the beauty in the other person. I think ‘That person is having a worse day than I am.’ This helps my soul.”

Jan, who took care of everyone in her family, including her husband during his seven-year cancer journey, uses a simple Christian prayer to find her inherent resilience and compassion: “Thy will be done.” She acknowledges she doesn’t have full control over the situation and, beyond doing what she can, is willing to let God choose the outcome.

Nancy uses the energy of feeling stressed to do constructive things for herself. When she’s feeling hyped up for any reason, she not only works with the source of the stress, but also takes that energy right into an exercise routine or something else physical like pushing a lawnmower.

Nancy says she feels great after a workout, and, while exercising, has time to reflect and gain perspective. While tending to be practical in her response to stress, she also taps into deeper inner resources. She shares a quote from a friend: “What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.” She adds, “That brings me back to where I am.”