



Dealing with Stress ... Build Resilience with Mind-Body Interventions

By Sherry McHenry

Stress. One doesn't have to search too far to find volumes of information about what stress is, how stressed our society has become, how it affects our bodies, our lives, and our occupations. As healthcare administrators, a "new normal" of chronic pressure, high performance demands, fast pace, and organizational change is widely acknowledged. Statistics indicate that:

- 80% of American workers say that they have experienced stress-related problems.
- Those working in the education and health services industry experience higher than average levels of stress.
- 51% of employees say they frequently feel physically or emotionally drained at the end of the workday.¹

What is far from normal are the documented costs of stress. One million workers are absent with stress-related illness every day, costing American employers about \$300 billion per year.¹ Chronic levels of stress affect performance, cause burnout, reduce patient service, lower morale, and increase medical and disability costs. How does one remain healthy and productive while living in a stressful, pressurized environment? One's attitude and habits while dealing with daily life can either restrict and narrow or broaden and expand the ability to cope.

Building Resilience

Resilience is the ability to adapt well to stress, adversity, trauma, or tragedy. It is the ability

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to bounce back from negative experiences and the flexibility to adapt to the changing demands of stressful experiences.² Resilient individuals are curious and open to new experiences and proactively cultivate positive emotions through the use of humor, relaxation techniques, and optimistic thinking. Resilience can give a person the ability to see beyond problems, find enjoyment in life, and handle future stressors more effectively. People who are more resilient have the ability to say to themselves, "Okay, this bad thing happened and I can either dwell on it or I can learn from it." While some individuals are more resilient than others, it is a skill that can be learned and cultivated. Developing positive patterns for dealing with stress can create a higher level of well-being physically and emotionally. See Box 1 for tips to build resilience.

Challenge Automatic, Negative Thinking

Because we are habitual beings, a person develops patterns that become the fabric of one's life based upon life experience. If you recognize that you fall into negative thinking patterns that are no longer useful, your next step is to examine specific thoughts. Do your

automatic thoughts have a pattern? Do they consistently exaggerate or distort a situation? Do you usually blame yourself? If your answer is "yes," you are experiencing negative thoughts. The next time you are in a stressful situation, such as a traffic jam or a conflict at work and feel ready to explode, try the following. Stop. Breathe. Release physical tension. Reflect. Ask yourself: Does this thought contribute to my stress? Where did I learn this thought? Is it logical? What is a more helpful, realistic response? Over time you can learn to identify negative, stressful patterns of thinking and hardwire yourself for resilience.

Mind-Body Coping Strategies

Psychoneuroimmunology (PNI) is a field of science that studies the interaction between one's perception of the world around them, behavior, brain function, and immune system. It addresses the complex bidirectional interactions of the central nervous system, the endocrine system, and the immune system in relation to various stressors. Researchers are discovering an interconnectedness of thought, belief, image, and biochemistry through neuropathways.³ Thoughts can create a negative stress cycle that flows in 2 directions. For example, a headache can affect your

workforce planning

BOX 1

Tips to Build Resilience

- *Ask yourself the following: What is meaningful in my life now? How can I be more compassionate toward myself? What actions can I take to expand what brings me joy?*
- *Get connected. Build strong, positive relationships with family and friends.*
- *Use humor and laughter. Humor is a helpful coping mechanism. If you can't find humor in a particular situation, turn to other sources, such as a funny movie or book, for a laugh.*
- *Accept and anticipate change. Be flexible. Try not to be so rigid. Expecting changes to occur makes it easier to adapt, tolerate, and even welcome.*
- *Take care of yourself. Tend to your own needs emotionally and physically. Learn and move on from past mistakes. It's not selfish. It positively affects everyone within your environment.*
- *Listen to self-talk. Change and heal those thoughts and emotions that create stress.*

mood and then, in turn, influence your thoughts: ie, "I won't be able to get through the day if I don't feel better soon." Or, focusing on negative thoughts can affect your mood and then lead to a headache.

Researchers are using strategies such as mind-body interventions to modulate immune function and impact physiologic resilience.³ The ongoing evidence from these interventions is promising. As of 2001, mind-body interventions has been classified as one of the major categories in a 5 category system of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM). Among the interventions constituting mind-body are focused relaxation, meditation, guided imagery, prayer, self-hypnosis, yoga, and tai chi. The use of mind-body interventions teaches a person to take control of his life and how to use personal, positive resources to reduce stress, negative behaviors, and thoughts. This helps to maintain or regain health and resilience.

Benson's Relaxation Response

The relaxation response is a physical state of deep rest that changes the physical and emotional responses to stress (by decreasing heart rate, blood pressure, rate of breathing,

and muscle tension). Herbert Benson, MD, founder of the Mind/Body Institute at Harvard Medical School, coined the term "relaxation response." Science tells us that the relaxation response reverses the symptoms of the stress response (increased heart rate, blood pressure, rate of breathing, and muscle tension) in as little as 3 minutes by changing thought patterns.⁴ The relaxation response can be elicited by a variety of techniques such as diaphragmatic breathing, repetition of a calming word or phrase, tai chi, meditation, and even knitting. When eliciting the relaxation response:

- Your metabolism decreases
- Your heart beats slower and your muscles relax
- Your breathing becomes slower
- Your blood pressure decreases
- Your levels of nitric oxide are increased

If practiced regularly, it can have lasting effects.

A Simple Step: Focused Breathing

Let yourself begin by incorporating a strategy that is easy. Breathe deeper a few times throughout the day. You can incorporate

8–10 full, comfortable breaths while at your workplace, walking, or taking a shower. Try it now, while reading this article. Feel your breath. See if you can take in a full, comfortable breath for 3 seconds . . . hold the breath for 3 seconds . . . and then exhale for 6 seconds. Repeat 8–10 times. Pay attention to your body. Breathe into any tense, tight muscles. Think of a word such as "calm" as you breathe. Your mind-body naturally benefits and, when you allow yourself to stay with it for as little as 3 minutes, the relaxation response is triggered.

Conclusion

Resilience is a skill that can be learned and cultivated by developing positive patterns for dealing with a stressful lifestyle. Incorporating mind-body strategies can reverse symptoms of the stress response in as little as 3 minutes. Regular use of these strategies can have lasting effects. As a healthcare administrator, building resilience can positively affect your well-being, as well as those within your daily environment. Mind-body strategies are intended to compliment your healthcare regimen, not replace. 🌱

References

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